

THE CHURCH AS A THEOCENTRIC COMMUNITY
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO CERTAIN ASPECTS
OF TRADITIONAL AFRICAN IDEAS OF
GOD AND MAN

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

This thesis suggests as well as expands the idea that the Church is a theocentric Community - a Community of re-created persons whose lives are to be centered on the only Living God, who as God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit brought the Community into existence. This way of looking at the nature of the Church differs from the over-Christocentric approach which tends to identify the Church exclusively with one member of the Godhead. At the same time, to regard the Church in an African context as a theocentric Community is an attempt to develop a specifically African Christian understanding of the Church in the hope that the type of ecclesiology to emerge from the study will be relevant and intelligible to an African convert.

It is the contention of this thesis that an enquiry into the nature of the Church will have to take into consideration the doctrines of God and man. If such a doctrine of the Church is to be understood by a given people and is to be responsive to their needs, then their traditional notions of God and man should not be ignored, no matter how distorted these may be.

The above position dictates the approach which is taken in the development of this thesis. The first chapter, which is the General Introduction to the Study, deals with some of the factors which are behind the present-day interest in ecclesiology. This chapter also treats briefly the nature of African Christian theology. This background material shows the need for an African Christian ecclesiology.

The second chapter of the thesis shows certain aspects of traditional African (with special reference to traditional Nigerian) ideas of God and man which are considered helpful in developing a theocentric model of the Church.

The third chapter is devoted to the development of the idea that the Church is a theocentric Community, and this is preceded by a brief discussion of the Biblical basis of the theocentric model which underlines the fact that the model is first and foremost rooted in the Biblical doctrines of God and man.

The fourth chapter is the summary and the conclusion of the study.

This thesis maintains that the theocentric model of the Church rules out any exclusive identification of the Church with one member of the Godhead, because the model identifies the Church with the only God who exists, the one who has revealed himself as God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The creation, the sustenance, and the consummation of the Church is always an act of one God who is the Triune God. Correspondingly, the Church is called to live its God-given life to the glory of the same God who alone is the Living God. The theocentric model assists the African convert to feel at home spiritually in the Church because the model identifies the origin of the Church with the same God whom the African knows in his traditional religions as the Supreme God who made the heavens and the earth, the ultimate sustainer of all that he has created.

I hereby declare that this thesis
is the work of my hands.

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TO
THE GLORY OF GOD THE FATHER,
THE SON AND THE HOLY SPIRIT
AND IN HONOUR
OF ALL WHO CALL UPON HIS NAME

CHAPTER ONE

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

THE CHURCH AS A THEOCENTRIC COMMUNITY
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO CERTAIN ASPECTS OF
TRADITIONAL AFRICAN IDEAS OF GOD AND MAN

CHAPTER ONE

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CHAPTER ONE

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

I. PURPOSE AND METHOD OF THE STUDY

This study is an essay on the nature of the Church. The main objective is to develop the idea that the Church is a theocentric Community, that is, God-centered Community, created by one God who reveals himself as God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This way of looking at the nature of the Church is opposed to the over-Christocentric approach which identifies the Church exclusively with one member of the Godhead.

In pursuing this aim, the writer intends to take the context of the Christian in Africa into consideration, with the hope that the type of ecclesiology which shall emerge out of the study may prove to be relevant and intelligible to the African Christian. In a religious tradition which offers people a strong sense of cosmic God-consciousness, nothing short of that sensitive awareness of God's concern for every area of life will respond adequately to their religious yearnings and needs.

The study is therefore an attempt to build up a theocentric model of the Church which has its root in the Bible, and at the same time is open to certain fundamental aspects of African traditional religions.

In consequence of what is said above, this dissertation proposes that any attempt to understand the nature of the Church ought to take

into consideration who God is according to the revelation of himself and what man is as a creature of this God. One would need to re-examine God's purpose for man as well as his concern for the entire universe. That task also includes a review of what has happened to the bond between God and man, and the relation between man and his fellow-man. Furthermore, God's intention in the call of Abraham, Israel and the role of the Prophets ought to be recalled in the attempt to comprehend the ontology of the Church. In addition, it is essential to undertake a careful recollection of the purpose of the coming of God himself in the person of Jesus Christ of Nazareth and the subsequent outpouring of his Holy Spirit.

The above presupposition recognizes that the Church which owes its existence to God cannot come into being outside God's eternal purpose for the glory of himself and his everlasting love for the entire creation. Consequently, this essay will suggest as well as expand the idea that the Church is a theocentric Community - a Community of re-created people whose lives are centered on the very Author of their existence. For when a man's whole life is centered on God, he is in a better position to have a proper vision of this God. Only then can the man understand his own life as a creature, and consequently sees as well as accepts his responsibility towards God and equally actualizes his concern for his neighbour.

To speak of the Church as God-centered is by no means an attempt to discredit other ecclesiological images that are used in describing the nature of the Church. However, a theocentric model of the Church has its place in the quest for comprehending what the Church is all about.

The method to be employed in realizing the goal of this study is largely dictated by the aim which governs the enquiry. Thus, the essay will first outline some of the factors which contribute to present-day interest in ecclesiology. This is followed by a brief examination of the nature of African Christian theology. Such a background helps to indicate certain areas of concern of Christian theology in Africa. At the same time, the discussion on African Christian theology points out the need for a doctrine of the Church which takes the cultural context of the Christian in Africa seriously.

In the second chapter of the dissertation, an attempt is made to present those ideas of God and man in African traditional religions which should not be ignored in the development of a relevant and intelligible ecclesiology for the African Christian.

The contention that the Church is a theocentric Community does not only rest on insights taken from African traditional religions. The idea is first and foremost grounded in the teachings of the Holy Scriptures. Consequently, the third chapter is devoted to the development of the idea that the Church is a theocentric Community and this is preceded by an introduction which focuses on a summary of certain aspects of a biblical doctrine of God and man.

On the basis of the presentation in the foregoing chapters, chapter four brings the study to an end with a summary and a conclusion.

II. BACKGROUND TO PRESENT-DAY INTEREST IN ECCLESIOLOGY

The twentieth-century ecclesiological question, "What is the nature of the Church?" is far from being a theological novelty. Christendom in its unfolding history has witnessed attempts to ask and answer the inescapable question concerning the essence of the Church. The Fathers, Medieval theologians and the Reformers have undertaken in varying degrees the search for understanding the nature of the Church. That enquiry is not only the prerogative of Christians in past generations but more than ever this century is symptomatic of what could be described as an exciting ecclesiological renaissance. If this is true, it is necessary to outline briefly some of the factors that contribute to this continuing search for the meaning and purpose of the Church.

A. THE HIDDENNESS OF THE CHURCH

The phrase 'hiddenness of the Church' immediately introduces an ambiguity that calls for clarification. What dimension of the Church is hidden? How can one speak authentically about what is concealed? The expression as it is used here does not suppose an esoteric existence which is accessible to possessors of some kind of 'Spiritual gnosis'. Nor does it by any means intend to suggest an 'invisible, holy and perfect Church' floating somewhere between heaven and earth. Welch rejects the term if it is an attempt to solve the problem of how the Church can be both human and divine by the construction of an abstract 'invisible Church' which can

only be seen by the eyes of faith.¹ Welch's rejection of the phrase 'hiddenness of the Church' in that context is acceptable, but its usage in this study is valid as it is intended to convey the fact that the Church is not understood completely at any given point in history. It is precisely this awareness of the mystery of the Church that constitutes an important factor in the on-going search for comprehending its nature, mission and destiny.

The Church's understanding of God and its perception of its own life, as well as its comprehension of the Holy Scriptures, is still imperfect and partial. "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood."²

There is a 'hiddenness' about the Church, that is, of not knowing perfectly and fully about the mysteries surrounding the very Author of its existence, the treasures of love and truth contained in the Scriptures. At each given moment in history, it would appear that there is a 'not-yet-disclosed' fact about the ontology of the Church and its place in God's eternal purpose for his Cosmic Order. This recognition that the Church is not yet known in its fullness does not encourage scepticism nor invite abject dogmatism, but that realization ought to pave the way for more openness to the Paraclete. It should lead to a more thoughtful examination of what ought to compose the ontological structures of the Church.

1 Claude Welch, THE REALITY OF THE CHURCH, pp.37-38.

2 I Corinthians 13:12 (R.S.V.).

B. THE CHANGING CHARACTER OF THE CHURCH

If there are any remaining 'monophysite ecclesiologists' today, they would probably regard any attempt to speak of the 'changing character of the Church' as a categorical falsity and an absurdity. In the opinion of 'monophysite ecclesiologists', the Church is absolutely divine in all its life and does not change, nor require any renewal.³ This belief is untenable as it ignores some basic facts that point to the unstatic dimensions of the Church.

The Church consists of men and women who are constantly experiencing changes in their lives and environments. While it is true that the Lord remains the same, the members and their multi-dimensional life-situations undergo variations. The Church can never stay static insofar as it exists here on earth and operates vitally within the socio-political, historico-economic and religio-cultural conditions of this world. As its sphere of action presents many radical and multitudinous problems and opportunities, the Church itself is being influenced continually. At the same time it seeks to mobilize its own resources in order to combat the issues and bring about transformation of world values, hearing and obeying the voice of its Lord.

It is substantially evident from everyday experiences of life, and perhaps more concretely from ecclesiastical history, that the Church as a living Community is growing while at the same time

3 Vladimir Lossky, THE MYSTICAL THEOLOGY OF THE EASTERN CHURCH, p.186. Cf. Stephen Neill, THE UNFINISHED TASK, p.14.

imperfect in its present life. For there still remains in it all kinds of sin, envy and jealousy, racism and aggressive tribalism, covetousness and selfishness, factionalism, and separatism, sectarianism and koinonia crisis. Yet, this consciousness of sinful life must continue to compel a persistent self-reflection, self-examination and self-criticism which ought to pave the way for renewal, reform and revitalization.

Furthermore, the changing character of the Church is noticeable in its past, present and future life. There should always be a healthy dialogue between the Church's past records, doctrines, activities and history, and its present condition and future hope. Such an examination must resist any attempt to absolutize either the past, the present or the future. The Church does not simply live on its past experiences alone. It cannot depend only on lessons drawn from its confrontation with heretical teachings of the early centuries in order to deal with today's secularism, atheism and Marxism. It is inadequate for the present-day Church to base its liturgical life solely on the Medieval forms of worship which were developed out of specific historical situations for a life-style that is not the same as that of today. At the same time, all the insights necessary for the revival of the Church today cannot be obtained from present circumstances alone. The Church has to look back to its origin. It has to recall some of the vital revival experiences of its life in the past. Similarly its eschatological hope does not originate abstractly in an unrelated vision of things-to-come. The hope for the future is grounded in God's creative action in

the past and on what he continues to do now in the lives of men and women that constitute his Church. It does mean that the journey towards the future is undertaken in constant reference to past and present events in its life. Such a backward look to its past, combined with a conscious response to the on-going leadership of its Lord, anchors the hope for the future. The Church's realization that it must continue to reflect faithfully upon its past, present and future life provides a strong basis for the persistent renewal of its doctrines and practices.

As the Church is confronted with crises, challenges and possibilities that previous generations could neither envisage nor anticipate, it seeks to scrutinize itself afresh in relation to the invading issues without attempting to escape or abandon its responsibility. Küng rightly asserts:

Ecclesiology is a response and a call to constantly changing historical situations. This requires repeated and determined attempts to mould, form and differentiate in freedom, unless ecclesiologists give up in despair at each new situation, close their eyes to them and simply drift. The Church's doctrine of the Church, like the Church itself, is necessarily subject to continual change and must constantly be undertaken anew. 4

Williams shares the same view and indeed contended that "obedience is an ever-new event, not a changeless order of continuity."⁵

4 Hans Küng, THE CHURCH, p.13.

5 Colin W. Williams, NEW DIRECTIONS IN THEOLOGY TODAY (Vol. IV): THE CHURCH, p.146.

An important influence in the changing character of the Church which must not be overlooked or allowed to subside within other factors is the presence of the Lord of the Church. Insofar as the Church is not merely a product of man's wisdom and his historical circumstances, but is brought into being by God through his redemptive activity as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the Church can never remain the same. For the life of the Church and its continuity rests not upon traditions of the Fathers, not upon the wisdom of ecclesiastical officers, but on the Grace of God. What is being said here is only a pointer to the fact that God always disciplines, chastises, reproves, reshapes, restructures, instructs, nurtures, revives, rekindles and upbuilds the Community that is named after him.

If the suggestion that at least some characteristics of the Church must change from time to time is valid, then there are pertinent questions that ought to be raised always. Such questions must not be over-looked or treated simply as peripheral. What areas of the Church remain immutable? What must be guiding standards for change? How far should such variations or transformation occur? While these questions are not intended to be answered here, they are certainly indicative of the type of issues and factors that facilitate the enduring enquiry about the nature of the Church.

C. THE CHURCH IN RELATION TO THE WORLD

There is another factor which compels an unceasing interest in ecclesiology. This is the problem of the relationship of the Church to the world.⁶ It would appear that there are three basic models of this relationship. These are tension, complementarity and neutrality.

Firstly, there is a recognizable tension between the two entities. The Church sees itself as a believing Community of faith and love, which has very distinct standards of living and a unique mission for the world. It understands itself as a pivotal instrument in the hands of its Lord, called out of the world, yet within the world, participating in the task of reconciling the lost world to the one God who possesses both the Church and the world. For it is written:

All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. ⁷

In carrying out this task, the Church necessarily finds itself in conflict with the world. The call to repentance is not good news as far as the world is concerned. That the world needs salvation

6 The term 'World' in this study does not mean 'evil realm' as in early Johannine conception and in most of the New Testament terminology. Here, it refers to the Whole Cosmic Order as God's creation. When used in contrast to the Church, it would mean all those outside the Church.

7 II Corinthians 5:18-19 (R.S.V.). Cf. Matthew 5:13, 14; 28: 18-20; I Peter 2:5, 9; Isaiah 42:6; 43:1.

through faith in Jesus Christ, although true, is such a dogmatic claim that the world is not always prepared to acknowledge it or accept it as a priority. The Church announces the coming of the wrath of God upon unrepentant sinners but such a message is considered by the world to be too pessimistic to be fulfilled at any foreseeable time. Not only the verbal proclamation of the message entrusted to the Church but the Church's daily life and practices that are directly or indirectly connected with its faith provoke a confrontation with the world.

From one point of view of the Church then, the world is unrepentantly hastening towards its eternal doom. Consequently, the Church regards itself as

the ark, perilously afloat amidst the turbulent seas of this world; outside the safety of this vessel mankind is going down to destruction and the only safety is to be dragged from the deep into the ecclesiastical ship. Or again, the Church has been seen as an armed camp and individual Christian soldiers are members of the army of the Lord of hosts set in the midst of active enemies. From time to time Christians sally forth their palisades to rescue from the hostile environment as many as they can. 8

But on the other hand, there is the world's rejection of the Church and its message. From time to time, it accuses the Church of preaching false doctrines and being irresponsible in social, economic, cultural and political matters. It points to the presence of sin in the Church and often thinks that the Church is self-righteous and arrogant, especially whenever the Church conceives of itself as the believing Community.

8 World Council of Churches (Geneva 1967), THE CHURCH FOR OTHERS AND THE CHURCH FOR THE WORLD: A QUEST FOR STRUCTURES FOR MISSIONARY CONGREGATIONS, p.17. Cf. II Corinthians 6:14, 17; James 1:27; I John 2:15-17.

The tension between the two communities at some point becomes violent in the form of many-sided persecutions and sometimes open war as in the case of the Crusades. The Church suffered heavily at the hands of unbelievers and has never ceased to suffer from the assaults of the world. Even this day, especially in atheistic Communist countries the Church is being persecuted.

It is clear from the foregoing that there is a tension between the Church and the world. However, there is another dimension of their relationship. This second aspect is the model of complementarity. Looking at it from one viewpoint of the Church, this relationship exists especially when there is a one-sided interpretation of the purpose and mission of the Church in the world. The Church's interest becomes only spiritual concern, a care for the souls of those who are spiritually dead. It is then like a 'religious ghetto' apparently fully committed to matters of ecclesiastical primacy.

In this complementary model, the Church rightly emphasizes its role as the 'salt of the earth' and 'light of the world'. But what part does the world play? This world becomes not only the arena for the Church's fulfilment of its responsibility but it provides the 'Agenda' for the missionary activities of the Church.⁹ The world creates the circumstance and the Church responds. This is partly on the ground that "the message and structures of the Churches can only be formulated with respect to the immense variety of actual realities amidst which we live."¹⁰

9 Ibid., p.20.

10 Ibid.

In contrast to the Church's understanding of its complementary role, most men and women outside the Church identify their own ultimate programme with the provision of material welfare, maintenance of civil liberty and order, and protection of matters that are considered to be of national interest.

The third and the last of the models of Church-world relationship is neutrality. This is an attitude of indifference. It is usually one direct consequence of the Church's refusal to perform its function and consequently it settles down comfortably with the world. Hendry makes this penetrating comment:

With the idea of a Corpus Christianum, a Christian Society or Christendom, which was inherited from Medieval Catholicism by the Churches of the Reformation, and which often found concrete expression in the institution of a State Church, the membership of the Church virtually coincided with that of the civil community, and indeed the Church was merely the civil community under a special aspect. The identification of the Church with the civil community was never perfectly realized, and not infrequently it had to be maintained by forceful measures; yet, for the most part, it was sufficiently real to relieve the Church of the necessity to identify or define itself. 11

When the Church lives on the level where it can no longer define or identify itself, then it is like salt that has lost its taste. This condition is undoubtedly a principal factor which has often promoted the call for revival within the Church. However, what ought to be stressed here is that these models of Church-world relationship, namely, tension, complementarity, and neutrality, point

11 George S. Hendry, "The theological Context of the Church today," THE ECUMENICAL ERA IN CHURCH AND SOCIETY: A SYMPOSIUM IN HONOR OF JOHN A. MACKAY, pp.36-37.

to the dynamic nature of the Church's connectedness with the world. It could be insisted that the cruciality of the problem of the Church and its relation to the world in which it must not only exist but live responsibly could be summed up thus: How can the Church unceasingly resist the temptation to become 'the Kingdom of the World', maintain its distinctiveness from the world and at the same time remain responsible to the world? The absence of any timeless deposits of neatly packed answers to questions arising from the dynamic nature of the relationship of the Church to the world must continue to be a major source of interest in ecclesiology.

D. THE IMPACT OF ECUMENICAL DIALOGUE

Twentieth-century ecumenical dialogue has also contributed to the present interest in ecclesiology. It was at the dawn of this century (1910) that some representatives of the Church from many parts of the world gathered in Edinburgh to plan a common missionary strategy for the fulfilment of the Great Commission.¹² It has been argued that this first Missionary-oriented Conference marked the beginning of the contemporary ecumenical movement which in turn became instrumental in the birth of the World Council of Churches.¹³ This Council is today the champion of ecumenical dialogue which is now operating in three main categories, namely, between the Church and other faiths, among different denominations of the Church, and between the Church and secular ideologies.¹⁴

The rise of these bilateral and multi-lateral dialogues not only poses serious questions as to the validity, necessity, relevance, nature and purpose of confessional conversations but increasingly provokes the Church to continually engage itself in self-interrogation

12 Carl F. Hallencreutz, "A Long-Standing Concern: Dialogue in Ecumenical History 1910-1971," LIVING FAITHS AND THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT, p.57. Cf. Kenneth Slack, THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT, pp.4-6.

13 Robert McAfee Brown, THE ECUMENICAL REVOLUTION: AN INTERPRETATION OF THE CATHOLIC-PROTESTANT DIALOGUE, pp.20-46.

14 Nils Ehrenstrom (ed.), CONFESSIONS IN DIALOGUE: A SURVEY OF BILATERAL CONVERSATIONS AMONG WORLD CONFESSIONAL FAMILIES, 1959-1974, p.230ff. Cf. World Council of Churches, DIALOGUE IN COMMUNITY: STATEMENT AND REPORTS OF A THEOLOGICAL CONSULTATION, CHIANG MAI, THAILAND, 18-27 April 1977, pp.39-42.

and self-probing of its beliefs, claims and practices. The current inter-denominational dialogue has promoted more critical enquiries on the nature of the Church, its mission and purpose. There is increasing research and discussion on the subject of Christian unity, intercommunion, worship, the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper.¹⁵ In particular, Catholic-Protestant dialogue has contributed to the growing reassessment of some of the teachings of the Church on such topics as 'Notes' or 'Marks' of the Church, 'Invisible Church', 'Scriptural inerrancy', 'Papal supremacy and infallibility', 'Marian Cult and Saintism'.¹⁶ This re-examination, self-questioning of long-held beliefs and practices, together with the ecclesiological presuppositions that underlie them, does not provide any ultimate basis for excessive optimism. For it is important to bear in mind that the result of the dialogue between different denominations within the Church is not the realization of a theological or doctrinal consensus on the various doctrines of the Church. The consultation has helped to produce a renewed provocation as well as inciting more interest in the persistent quest for what actually constitutes the Church. While it is true that as a result of the encounter, some particular doctrinal propositions once held to be indisputable are receiving fresh interpretations, and in some cases, they are being rejected as fallacious, there is the opposite tendency, when some insights are firmly resisted although they appear to have positive value in the

15 Ibid., pp.181ff.

16 Ibid.

eyes of some.¹⁷ These conversations often provide the occasion for a more thoroughly self-defensive type of ecclesiology which is sometimes camouflaged as the defence of the faith of the Church. The awareness of this mutual effect of inter-denominational dialogue is indicated in this quotation:

An interchurch dialogue does not only stimulate greater openness and a sharing of the gifts of the Spirit. It does also have the opposite effect: a heightened self-awareness and self-assertiveness blocking the impulses towards a wider fellowship. The latter reaction is often made more intractable by the assumption that an identity forms a consistent, indissoluble whole, sometimes epitomised in a sacred code-word, and that even the slightest modification or concession at this point would mean betraying the faith. 18

Furthermore, in contemporary interfaith dialogue, some of the questions that have been advanced or those that are being raised, including the ones that ought to be asked, are of such character that the Church has to live up to the challenge unless it refuses to be sensitive and a responsible Community of the Living Lord. For example, how is Jesus Christ fundamentally different from founders of other religions that are represented in the current religious dialogue? How would the Church at least respond to some of the vital, doctrinal claims of men of other faiths without betraying or compromising its own faith and mission? For instance, Orthodox Muslims insist that there is no salvation outside Islamic

17 Ibid., Cf. S. J. Samartha (ed.), TOWARDS WORLD COMMUNITY: THE COLOMBO PAPERS, pp.7f.

18 Ehrenstrom, op. cit., p.248.

faith.¹⁹ Hinduism teaches that every religion is equally valid and absolute.²⁰ Many adherents of Judaism are still expecting the Messiah but this same Christ the Church has already acknowledged; his arrival and his continuing presence is being celebrated by the Church while awaiting the consummation of God's purpose for his creatures.

The mention of these assertions of other religions here does not ignore the point that the Church has been aware of such claims before the present-day ecumenical discussions. But the fact that they are currently re-stated in the context of inter-religious consultation has created an additional interest and varied implication. Interfaith conversation has brought about an unprecedented understanding of some of the beliefs and practices of men of other religions. It has uncovered some of the presuppositions behind the theological expressions of their faith. In addition, it has revealed more sharply some of the ways that non-Christians think about the Church. It may also be stressed that men of other living faiths are now reauthenticating their doctrinal propositions in order to make them more meaningful and coherent. In short, the

19 Mushir-Ul-Haq, "The Universal Aspects of Islam," TOWARDS WORLD COMMUNITY: THE COLOMBO PAPERS, pp.69-70.

While pointing out Orthodox Muslim view is that salvation must be attained through the Islamic faith, this writer is aware of the fact that many Christians also contend that there is no salvation outside Christ. For the Bible declares: "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." Acts 4:12 (R.S.V.). However, Vatican II admits the possibility of salvation for 'sincere God-seekers' outside Christ. (Austin Flannery, VATICAN COUNCIL II: THE CONCILIAR AND POST-CONCILIAR DOCUMENTS, pp.367-8.)

20 Ibid. Cf. K. Sivaraman, "Resources in Hindu Morality and Religion," TOWARDS WORLD COMMUNITY: THE COLOMBO PAPERS, pp.26-30.

meeting of men of living faiths has brought about a renewed eagerness on the part of each religious tradition to recognize and accept the necessity for critical reformulation of their religious convictions.²¹

The impact of the present ecumenical conversation upon the Church is further manifest in the Christian-Marxist dialogue. Having said that, it is worth pointing out that it is unrewarding at this point to delve into details of the arguments for or against the reasonableness of the Church's dialogue with Marxism. It is sufficient here to say that if one takes the view which is represented by Molnar, dialogue with Marxists is compromise with the devil.²² But, on the other hand, there are those who consider Christian-Marxist consultation as a necessary step in the right direction.²³

Certainly, no one who is conscious of the increasing influence of Marxism, which is spreading all over the world, particularly in the continent of Africa, can ignore the seriousness of the Christian-Marxist consultation. Sovik has rightly commented as follows: "the rise of Marxism as a political power has confronted Christians with the need to look at themselves - the Church - and their task from a new point of view."²⁴

21 Ibid.

22 Thomas Molnar, ECUMENISM OR NEW REFORMATION, pp.115-133.

23 Paul Mojzes (ed.), "Varieties of Christian-Marxist Dialogue," JOURNAL OF ECUMENICAL STUDIES, 15 No.1 (Winter, 1978), pp.64-86.

24 Arne Sovik, "Introduction" ("The Aarhus Workshop" on "Theological Reflection on the Encounter of the Church with Marxism in Various cultural contexts,") JOURNAL OF ECUMENICAL STUDIES, 15 No.1 (Winter, 1978), p.64.

In order to grasp the force of the call for the Church to act in response to the Marxist challenge, one must review very briefly some of the basic tenets of Marxism, especially those that appear to threaten or exert pressure upon the Church's life and ministry.

For many Marxists, particularly Atheistic Marxists, God's existence is denied and rejected as man's imaginary self-projection.²⁵ Religion which has "neither essence nor a realm" is nothing but "a reflection of social conditions" and it will eventually die out with the establishment of a 'classless society' through human effort alone.²⁶ Accordingly, Christianity has alienated men from their earthly abode through its proclamation of the existence of a Spiritual realm which is beyond this 'kingdom of man'.²⁷ This doctrine of separation from this world in the name of religion has enabled many people to abandon their economic and socio-political responsibility.²⁸ The road to a harmonious human community is bedevilled by exploitative socio-political structures and all men of goodwill must unite together in the final revolution which will gradually give birth to a 'new society' - where men shall attain the highest level of their self-realization.²⁹

25 Helmut Gollwitzer, "The Marxist Critique of Religion and the Christian Faith," STUDY ENCOUNTER, 4 No.1 (1968), pp.6-19.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid. Cf. Vincenzo Miano, "Dialogue is not Alien to Roman Catholics," STUDY ENCOUNTER, 4 No.1 (1968), pp.31-42.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

If the Church's commitment to a world community has necessitated its dialogue with Marxism,³⁰ then it cannot and must not overlook the challenges of such an encounter. The dialogue demands an end to the luxury of simply hurling condemnations and anathemas against the Utopian vision of Marxism. There is a more urgent task which must not even be reduced to a scholarly refutation of all Marxist propositions that are directed against the Church. This task includes an unceasing review of the Church's understanding of its own nature, a re-examination of its faithfulness to society, and a constant unfolding of its doctrinal package in order to explain its attitude and its solidarity with all men. The Church is under obligation to continue to re-evaluate its contribution to the material and spiritual needs of mankind.

30 World Council of Churches, DIALOGUE IN COMMUNITY: STATEMENTS AND REPORTS OF A THEOLOGICAL CONSULTATION, CHIANG MAI, THAILAND, 18-27 April 1977, pp.16-22.

E. THE PROBLEM OF JEWISH-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS

An essential factor which focuses attention on ecclesiology is the problem of Jewish-Christian relations. It is certainly a valid observation to assert that their relationship has not always been marked by mutual love and amicability.³¹ At the very beginning of the first century A.D., confrontation between them had already become noticeable.³² It soon became open persecution of those who had faith in Jesus Christ as God's Messiah. As the number of Christian disciples increased, fierce opposition, mutual suspicion and persecution widened the gulf between those who believed that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God and those who considered such affirmation as heretical and blasphemous.³³

However, for a short period after the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, there was relative peace between the two groups.³⁴ But shortly after this relaxation of tension, the unfortunate antagonism which badly impaired their relationship became heightened. The claims of the Gospel of Jesus Christ as enthusiastically proclaimed by his disciples were upsetting the religious status quo. The increasingly charismatic life-style of the believers and the spread of the Gospel into the Gentile world stirred up more violent reaction.³⁵

31 John F. O'Grady (ed.), "Presenting the Issue," BIBLICAL THEOLOGY BULLETIN: A JOURNAL OF BIBLE AND THEOLOGY, 7 No.3 (1977), p.98.

32 Acts 4:1f.

33 Acts 5:12ff.

34 Acts 9:31f.

35 Acts 13-26.

The gap between the two has never been bridged since their mutual excommunication resulting in the emergence of the Christian Community outside the synagogue.³⁶ This final schism occurred as the direct aftermath of the Roman suppression of the revolt led by Bar Kochba in A.D. 135.³⁷ This second-century destructive invasion of Palestine was not only a tragic blow to the Messianic expectations of Jews. Christians as well were compelled to re-think their sudden and immediate anticipation of the Parousia, the second coming of the Messiah.³⁸ These believers "gradually abandoned the hope of Christ's imminent return and organized the Church into an autonomous earthly society capable of lasting permanently."³⁹

The already regrettable schismatic situation became more lamentable when Christians directly and indirectly in collaboration with secular authorities persecuted Jews for many centuries.⁴⁰ Christians forgot their own bitter experiences of persecution and sadly neglected the teachings of the very Messiah who taught them to love both 'enemies' and 'neighbors'.⁴¹ These centuries of maltreatment of Jews, notably by the

36 Cf. Stephen Neill, "Introduction," THE CHURCH AND THE JEWISH PEOPLE, Göte Hedenquist, editor, p.15.

37 Jean Radermakers, S. J., "Meaning and Purpose of the Jewish-Christian dialogue (I) - Recalling our Relations: A brief Historical Account," CHRISTIAN ATTITUDES ON JEWS AND JUDAISM: A BI-MONTHLY DOCUMENTARY SURVEY, Number 45 (December 1975), p.5.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Cf. Vienna Cardinal's Address, "End of 'Christian' Antisemitism," CHRISTIAN ATTITUDES ON JEWS AND JUDAISM: A BI-MONTHLY DOCUMENTARY SURVEY, Number 43 (August 1975), pp.4-5.

41 Küng, op. cit., pp.133-138.

'Imperial Church' of the Constantinian era, the Crusaders, the State and Churchmen in Europe during the later Middle Ages, and by some of the reformers, especially Martin Luther, have undoubtedly left an 'unholy scar' upon Christendom.⁴² It is not surprising then, as some have argued, that long-standing Christian ill-treatment of Jews to some degree culminated in the unparalleled murderous atrocities of the Nazis against the Jews.⁴³

In order to avoid creating any further impression that the immediate task here consists of providing an outline of Jewish-Christian history of mutual persecution, the next step now would be a brief indication of two basic religious attitudes of both Jews and Christians which characterize their relationship. It is important to mention such attitudes here only as an attempt to indicate the impact of the problem of their interrelatedness upon ecclesiology, especially as these ideas raise vital questions on the nature of Christian Mission to Jews today.

The first category could be broadly labelled as the attitude of Supersedence and Contemptuousness. Traditionally and even in this century, some Christians hold the view that Christianity supersedes

42 Ibid.

43 A.Roy Eckardt, "Anti-Semitism," JEWS AND CHRISTIANS: PREPARATION FOR DIALOGUE, pp.152-156. Cf. Fr. Edward H Flannery, "All Christians are antisemitic," CHRISTIAN ATTITUDES ON JEWS AND JUDAISM: A BI-MONTHLY DOCUMENTARY SURVEY, Number 48 (June 1976), pp.1-2.

Judaism - the religion of the Jews.⁴⁴ According to this understanding, the birth of Christianity means the 'abrogation' of Jewish religion.⁴⁵ Judaism post-Christianity is at its best like any other non-Christian monotheistic religions.⁴⁶ The 'Law' is abolished because of the arrival of the new era through Christ.⁴⁷

Furthermore, 'Old' Testament Scriptures are believed to have their main thrust only as the description of God's preparation for Christianity, the new Universal religion.⁴⁸ With this view in mind, Jews are called upon to renounce their expectation of the Messiah because he is already here as Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ of God.⁴⁹ In connection with this attitude, Christians become the 'New Israel' and 'heirs of the Promises' that were made to the 'Old Israel' since Jews failed to recognize the Messiah.⁵⁰

44 Coos Schoneveld, "The religious roots of Jewish Nationhood," CHRISTIAN ATTITUDES ON JEWS AND JUDAISM: A BI-MONTHLY DOCUMENTARY SURVEY, Number 46 (February 1976), p.1.

45 R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, "Jewish-Christian Relations with Particular Reference to the Contribution of the State of Israel," Off-print from CHRISTIAN NEWS FROM ISRAEL: NEW SERIES, 24 Nos.2-3 (Autumn-Winter 1973), p.117.

46 Ibid.

47 Cf. Ernest Willmott, "Christians' need for a new theology of Israel," CHRISTIAN ATTITUDES ON JEWS AND JUDAISM: A BI-MONTHLY SURVEY, Number 26 (October 1972), p.5.

48 James Parker, JUDAISM AND CHRISTIANITY, pp.113-139.

49 Ibid., these ideas are rooted in the New Testament, especially in the Epistles of Paul. Cf. Robert Everett, "Christian theology after the holocaust," CHRISTIAN ATTITUDES ON JEWS AND JUDAISM: A BI-MONTHLY DOCUMENTARY SURVEY, Number 50 (October 1976), pp.10-11.

50 Schoneveld, loc. cit.

But from one Jewish point of view, Christianity is nothing more than a religion of the 'Nazarene Sect'.⁵¹ It is said that "For many Jews, Christianity is just another all but pagan religion."⁵² The Christian religion is at best classified with other monotheistic religions - "disfigured, no doubt by grave blemishes."⁵³

The second attitude which characterizes their relationship is the conscious awareness of a common religious root and appreciation of one another's uniqueness. This position is opposed to the radical attitude of outright dismissal and condemnation. There is an increasing recognition on the part of many Christians today that Jews are not only bearers of the Covenant which has provided the religious heritage for Christianity, but they are by virtue of that Covenant placed in a continuing special relationship with Christians.⁵⁴

In relation to this view, it is argued that "The singular grace of Jesus Christ does not abrogate the covenantal relationship of God with Israel (Rom. 11:1-2). In Christ the Church shares in Israel's election without superseding it."⁵⁵

The uniqueness of Jews as recipients of the First Covenant puts them in a special category which Christians cannot successfully

51 Werblowsky, op. cit., pp.117-118.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.

54 North American Theologians, "A Statement to our Fellow-Christians - Israel: People, Land, State," CHRISTIAN ATTITUDES ON JEWS AND JUDAISM: A BI-MONTHLY DOCUMENTARY SURVEY, Number 32 (October 1973), p.9.

55 Ibid.

abandon without a betrayal of their own origin and ongoing life.

It is thus asserted in the following words:

The Christian Church is still sustained by the living faith of the Patriarchs and prophets, kings and priests, scribes and rabbis, and the people whom God chose for his own. Christ is the link (Gal. 3:26-29) enabling the Gentiles to be numbered among Abraham's "offspring" and therefore fellow-heirs with the Jews according to God's promise. 56

While this special relationship is assented to, it is further contended that Christianity and Judaism are not identical, so that the Jew still needs to hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ because this Gospel is to be proclaimed to all Nations, including Jews.⁵⁷

On the other hand, the awareness of the singular character of their relationship is by no means the Christian prerogative. Some Jews acknowledge the peculiar nature of their religious connection with Christians.⁵⁸ In their view, Judaism is not only the parent religion of Christianity but Jesus of Nazareth and his early disciples were Jews.⁵⁹ However, this appreciation of the speciality of their relations does not obliterate the rejection of any form of Christian 'conversion' or 'proselytization'.⁶⁰

56 Ibid. Cf. Thomas F. Torrance, CONFLICT AND AGREEMENT IN THE CHURCH, Vol. One, ORDER AND DISORDER, pp.298ff.

57 Neill, op. cit., pp.21ff. Cf. Romans 1:16.

58 Werblowsky, loc. cit.

59 Ibid.

60 Cf. Rosemary Ruther, "The future of Christian theology about Judaism," CHRISTIAN ATTITUDES ON JEWS AND JUDAISM: A BI-MONTHLY DOCUMENTARY SURVEY, Number 49 (August 1976), pp.1-5. Also, Harriet L. Kaufman, "Teaching Christians About Judaism," CHRISTIAN ATTITUDES ON JEWS AND JUDAISM: A BI-MONTHLY DOCUMENTARY SURVEY, Number 46 (February 1976), pp.23-25.

The foregoing sketchy outline of an involved subject such as 'Jewish-Christian relations' at least serves one immediate purpose. That is, the Jewish-Christian relationship remains an unavoidable factor in the timeless struggle to grasp the nature of the Church. For their existence in separation will continue to raise questions on how they ought to be related to one another and their place in God's eternal purpose for his creatures. It may then be asked: Has what is today called the Church any mission to the Jews? If any, what would be the nature of that mission? To these interrogations must be added two other closely associated questions that are often put forward in Christian theology, particularly on the subject of the identity of Jews and Christians. In the words of Moltmann:

Does the divine history of Israel merge into Church history in such a way that Israel, as 'the ancient people of God', has been superseded and rendered obsolete by 'new people of God'? Or does Israel retain its own particular 'vocation for salvation', side by side with the Church, down to the end of history? 61

Surely, these questions provoke an on-going discussion on 'Jewish-Christian relations'.

61 Jürgen Moltmann, THE CHURCH IN THE POWER OF THE SPIRIT: A CONTRIBUTION TO MESSIANIC ECCLESIOLOGY, p.137.

F. THE ENIGMA OF CHURCH AND CULTURE

The problem of the relationship of the Church to the cultural society in which it exists has ever remained a stubborn factor in the enduring search for the Church's identity and the fulfilment of the goal of its existence. In order to appreciate more of the gravity of this problem, it would be appropriate to state briefly the basic meaning of the term 'Culture'. But before undertaking that task, it is necessary to make a few remarks about the word 'Church'. So far in this study, no direct effort has been made to define the term. The apparent refusal to do so is not a calculated attempt to evade the arduous task of seeking to understand such a word, about which so much has been written and which many people claim to understand. But it is intended that the development of the dissertation itself will throw light on the meaning of the term 'Church' rather than giving a straight-forward definition at this point. However, it may be helpful to say at present that the 'Church' is a God-centered Community of those who have acknowledged and appropriated the gift of Salvation which God has graciously offered. Such a preliminary statement is helpful not only on the basis of what has been said so far but also in connection with the Church's relation to Culture.

What then is the basic meaning of culture? Kroeber and Kluckhohn arrived at the following basic ideas about culture after a critical survey and analysis of over one hundred and sixty definitions:

Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e., historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other as conditioning elements of further action. 62

This definition is undoubtedly loaded with meaning. From it, some facts emerge which are helpful in the on-going discussion. Firstly, culture is a product of human achievement.⁶³ Secondly, it is inherited and communicated by a group of human beings.⁶⁴ Thirdly, it is dynamic and consequently non-static.⁶⁵ Fourthly, it pervades the whole area of human life.⁶⁶

Holding a similar view about culture, Niebuhr contends that culture "comprises language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organization, inherited artifacts, technical processes and values."⁶⁷

Culture is viewed here as the sum total of human behaviour.⁶⁸ This realization of the comprehensive totality of culture undergirds the fact that no one can escape the permeating influence of culture.⁶⁹

62 A. L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, "A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions," NEW CATHOLIC ENCYCLOPEDIA, IV, p.522. Cf. Richard Kluckhohn, COLLECTED ESSAYS OF CLYDE KLUCKHOHN: CULTURE AND BEHAVIOR, p.73.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid.

67 H. Richard Niebuhr, CHRIST AND CULTURE, p.32.

68 Ibid.

69 Cf. Ruth Benedict, PATTERNS OF CULTURE, pp.2f.

The overwhelming difficulties which surround any attempt to arrive at a universally acceptable definition of culture are not overlooked, but the foregoing outline of the basic meaning of culture provides sufficient guide for the continuing enquiry on the enigma of Church and Culture relationship.

One of the doctrinal problems which confronted the Church in the early New Testament period was the issue of its identity in relation to culture.⁷⁰ The problem led to the convening of a major doctrinal conference of the Church - the Jerusalem Council.⁷¹ This ecclesiastical Assembly of Jerusalem was to decide whether circumcision was necessary for the Gentile convert's incorporation into the Church.⁷²

The contents of the New Testament, particularly the Epistles, bear significant witness to the direct or indirect tension between the Church and Culture. For example, Paul, together with other followers of Christ, was to wrestle with a fresh understanding of the 'customs' of Moses, circumcision and the Law, Graeco-Roman principles of morality, institution of marriage and celibacy, authority of the state, law suits, liberty, participation in non-Christian feasts, the veiling of women, glossolalia, observance of religious rites and asceticism.

70 Cf. Acts 15:1-35.

71 Ibid.

72 Ibid.

Furthermore, the issue of Church-Culture crisis of identity was an underscoring factor which contributed to some of the theological interests of Christian Fathers, Medieval Christian writers, and the Reformers as well as contemporary Christian theologians.⁷³ This perennial problem occurs

in the early struggles of the Church with the empire, with the religions and philosophies of the Mediterranean world, in its rejections and acceptances of prevailing mores, moral principles, metaphysical ideas, and forms of social organization. The Constantinian settlement, the formulation of the great creeds, the rise of the Papacy, the monastic movement, Augustinian Platonism, and Thomistic Aristotelianism, the Reformation and the Renaissance, the Revival and the Enlightenment, liberalism and the Social Gospel . . . in many forms as well as in all ages; as the problem of reason and revelation, of religion and science, of natural and divine law, of State and Church, of non-resistance and coercion . . . in such specific studies as those of the relations of Protestantism and Capitalism, of pietism and nationalism, of Puritanism and democracy, of Catholicism and Romanism or Anglicanism, of Christianity and Progress. 74

While the foregoing quotation attests to the enduring tension between the Church and culture, it also emphasizes the inevitability of their interrelatedness. The proclamation of the Good News concerning God's gift of salvation through Jesus Christ not only calls in question existing customs and traditions of men but such a message cannot be communicated or expressed in a cultural vacuum.⁷⁵

73 Niebuhr, op. cit., pp.10-11.

74 Ibid., p.10.

75 Ibid., pp.69-76. Cf. Jean Daniélou, THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE BEFORE THE COUNCIL OF NICAIA (volume one): THE THEOLOGY OF JEWISH CHRISTIANITY, pp.1ff.

This same Author has two other volumes which are helpful on the subject:

- 1) A HISTORY OF EARLY CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE BEFORE THE COUNCIL OF NICAIA (volume two): GOSPEL MESSAGE AND HELLENISTIC CULTURE.
- 2) A HISTORY OF EARLY CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE BEFORE THE COUNCIL OF NICAIA (volume three): THE ORIGINS OF LATIN CHRISTIANITY.

The Church does not preach 'culture', but the Gospel which it proclaims cannot take place without the aid and influence of culture. The same permeating effect of culture is true for the Church's doctrines, liturgy and the steps toward the realization of its entire mission. In other words, men and women who constitute the Church are by their nature compelled to live and exercise their faithfulness to God and their neighbours vis-a-vis culture.⁷⁶ But this is not to say that the Church is a helpless victim in the hands of culture. Even though the pervasive character of culture in the lives of members of the Church is recognized, there is also the other side of the coin, namely, that the Church renews, transforms and gives new meaning to societal language, habits, customs, traditions and concepts in the light of the redeeming Grace of God through Jesus Christ.⁷⁷

The enigma of the Church in relation to culture grows even deeper with the conscious awareness of cultural plurality and heterogeneity. The fact that each human group has its own customs, language, beliefs, social organization, inherited artifacts and values which are not identical with other human groups poses thought-provoking questions for ecclesiologists. For example:

1. How far should the Church in a particular society be identified with the Culture of that community of people?

76 Cf. Osadolor Imasogie, "Christian Attitude to the Current Revival of Culture," pp.22-25.

77 Cf. Niebuhr, op. cit., pp.190ff. Lesslie Newbigin, "Christ and the Cultures," SCOTTISH JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY, 31 (1978), pp.13f. Emil Brunner, CHRISTIANITY AND CIVILIZATION, pp.127ff.

2. Is there an 'all-sufficient' culture through which every understanding of the nature of the Church must be based or related without reference to other cultures?
3. What role does culture play in the search for understanding the ontological structures of the Church?

For this writer, the above questions form part of the motivating factors which call attention to the need for an African Christian understanding of the Church.

G. THE CHURCH IN RELATION TO GOD THE FATHER, SON AND HOLY SPIRIT

Another factor which motivates interest in the meaning, purpose and mission of the Church is the relation of the Church to the triune God. It would appear that many Christians, especially Christian theologians, are divided over the nature of the Church's relation to the Persons within the Godhead. The controversy is noticeable particularly in the over-emphasis of one or two Persons of the Godhead in relation to the Church as if the other member of the Holy Trinity is an 'Observer'.

There are those who would like to over-stress the Church's relationship to Jesus Christ. In his book entitled, CHRIST AND HIS CHURCH, Nygren contends:

The Church cannot exist without Christ: Christ cannot be present without his Church. The Messianic people cannot exist without the Messiah; the Messiah cannot be a Messiah without a people. Thus they are mutually connected one with the other, and this reciprocity is essential. Christology and ecclesiology condition one another. 78

This view of the Church in relation to Christ is largely based on one of the images of the Church in the New Testament, "the Body of Christ."⁷⁹ Berkhof rightly points out this tendency as follows: "Some in our day seem to regard this appellation as a complete definition of the New Testament Church, but it is not so."⁸⁰

78 Anders Nygren, CHRIST AND HIS CHURCH, p.31.

79 Cf. Ibid. pp.93ff.; I Corinthians 12.

80 Louis Berkhof, SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY, p.557.

The Church in relation to Christ is more dogmatically stated in the words of Hodge:

The only possible definition of a Church is that it consists of what is termed "the body of Christ" - that is, human souls regenerated by the presence and power of the Holy Ghost (Spirit), kept in immediate union with Christ This is the true Church, which exists through all the successive generations of men, which is united to Christ, and which shares in the benefits of his redemption through the indwelling of the Holy Ghost (Spirit). 81

The belief that the Church is an establishment of Christ on earth runs through Bannerman's first volume, THE CHURCH OF CHRIST. He affirms his Christocentric ecclesiology by asserting that "the Church is a Divine institution, owing its origin not to man, but to Christ, and associated together not in consequence of human arrangement, but by Christ's appointment,"⁸²

Weigel, a notable Roman Catholic scholar has this to say about the Church in relation to Christ:

The Roman Catholic Church believes that this Church is exclusively the Church of Christ. By that fact she believes that she is Christ continued in space and time, with His mission to save, to teach, to comfort, to guide, to sanctify, and all this she will do because Christ and Catholicism are fused into one life with Him as head and she as the body. 83

81 A. A. Hodge, EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY: LECTURES ON DOCTRINE, pp.176-177.

82 James Bannerman, THE CHURCH OF CHRIST: A TREATISE ON THE NATURE, POWERS, ORDINANCES, DISCIPLINE AND GOVERNMENT OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH (Vol.1), p.18.

83 Gustive Weigel, "Catholic Theology in Dialogue," THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH, p.301.

This must not be taken to mean that Weigel's exposition is the view of all Roman Catholics. The Second Vatican Council does accept the possibility of other ecclesiological images, although the Church as the "Kingdom of Christ" is still over-accentuated.⁸⁴

From another viewpoint of the relationship of the Church to God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, there are those who place their emphasis on the Holy Spirit's possession of the Church. Newbigin speaks of a third stream of Christian tradition (Pentecostals) whose primary tenet is to perceive the Church as "the Community of the Holy Spirit."⁸⁵

Newbigin has suggested that although the Church has a pneumatological dimension, it amounted to misrepresentation if that image of the Church above is seen as covering the whole idea of the Church.⁸⁶ Any attempt to do so is to undo the Spirit from the Body.⁸⁷

Lossky champions another attempt to relate the Church to the Persons in the Godhead. For him, the Church is the creation of the Son and the Holy Spirit.⁸⁸ He expanded this view as follows:

84 The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, DOGMATIC CONSTITUTION ON THE CHURCH (DE ECCLESIA), pp.5ff. Translated by Austin Garvey.

85 Lesslie Newbigin, THE HOUSEHOLD OF GOD: LECTURES ON THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH, pp.87ff.

86 Ibid., p.108.

87 Ibid.

88 Vladimir Lossky, THE MYSTICAL THEOLOGY OF THE EASTERN CHURCH, p.174.

The Holy Spirit who rests like a royal unction upon the humanity of the Son, Head of the Church, communicating Himself to each member of this body, creates, so to speak, many Christs, many of the Lord's anointed: Persons in the way of deification by the side of the divine Person. Since the Church is the work of Christ and of the Holy Spirit, the doctrine of the Church has a double foundation - it is rooted both in Christology and in Pneumatology. 89

This pneumato-Christocentric ecclesiology, according to Lossky, has its biblical foundation in Pauline understanding of the Church as in the first chapter of the Epistle to the Ephesians.⁹⁰

Finally, there are those who call attention to the fact that the Church, if it is to be viewed in its completeness, must be identified with God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, without attempting to assign it to either one or two Persons of the Godhead. Welch has this to say:

The Church is not Christ, or another Christ; it is not the incarnation. The doctrine of the two natures cannot be directly transferred to the Church. Nor can the Church be considered exclusively in relation to Christ. It must be viewed also in the context of the work of the Holy Spirit, or, more properly of the triune God. 91

Schlink points out that, ecclesiology taken in its wholeness must have a trinitarian context.⁹² He opposes the idea of equating

89 Ibid.

90 Ibid., p.190.

91 Claude Welch, THE REALITY OF THE CHURCH, p.28.

92 Edmund Schlink, THE COMING CHRIST AND THE COMING CHURCH, pp.96-97.

the doctrine of the Church with only Christology.⁹³ Such equation is a perilous isolation.⁹⁴ It is worth noting that while asserting this position, Schlink himself admitted in the same work that he was concerned with the Christological dimension of the Church.⁹⁵

The Church, whether with reference to its origin, or in connection with its present life and its life to come, must always be identified with one God who reveals Himself as God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

In concluding the foregoing presentation of some factors which contribute to the perennial reflection upon the nature of the Church, it must be remarked that the treatment is not meant to be exhaustive. However, the problems raised in the discussion constitute vital compelling issues which motivate this enquirer's interest in ecclesiology.

93 Ibid.

94 Ibid.

95 Ibid.

III. A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE NATURE OF AFRICAN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

A. INTRODUCTION

Never before in the history of the Church in Africa has there been such a widespread desire to relate the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the needs of African Christians and their environment as in the last twenty years of this century. There has been a remarkable interest expressed in Conferences and Seminars which are aimed at discovering more productive ways of communicating the Gospel message in an African setting.¹

One of the developments within the yearning to have an African Christianity is the search for Christian theologies that are relevant and intelligible to the African Christian. The quest has provoked reactions which could be broadly outlined as follows:

First, there are those who consider the idea of developing an African Christian theology as a "theological apostasy."² In their opinion, such a theology is a radical departure from "traditional Christian theology" which they claim is valid for Christians in every generation and place.

1 A number of books have been published as a result of such Conferences, for example, CHRISTIANITY IN INDEPENDENT AFRICA, edited by Edward Fasholé - Luke & Co.; AFRICAN THEOLOGY EN ROUTE, edited by Kofi Appiah - Kubi and Sergio Torres.

2 The phrase "theological apostasy" is coined by this writer to refer to the opinion of those who are uncomfortable about African Christian theology. Cf. John S. Mbiti, "African Theology," WORLDVIEW, 16 No.8 (August 1973), p.33.

In contrast to this type of attitude, others give an over-enthusiastic response to the idea of having African Christian theologies, as if the production of such theologies will eliminate all the religious crises and ecclesiastical problems facing the continent.³ Their excitement often extends to the suggestion that the first part of the Bible should be replaced with African traditional religions.⁴

The third and the last broad category are those who acknowledge the legitimate need for such a theology. At the same time, they contend that Christian theology in Africa should grow out of a genuine openness to the African situation, faithfulness to Biblical revelation and dialogue with other Christian theologies outside of Africa.⁵

Whether one chooses to adopt an ultra-fundamentalist attitude or decides to join the bandwagon of the over-enthusiastic sentimentalists or even casts a vote for the critical and the objective response, the task of developing more relevant Christian theologies for Africa has begun. There appears to be no retreat in the project.

3 In the same article cited above, John S. Mbiti speaks of this group.

4 Cf. Samuel G. Kibicho, "African Traditional Religion and Christianity," A NEW LOOK AT CHRISTIANITY IN AFRICA, pp.14f.

5 Cf. "Final Communique: Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians," AFRICAN THEOLOGY EN ROUTE: PAPERS FROM THE PAN-AFRICAN CONFERENCE OF THIRD WORLD THEOLOGICALS, DECEMBER 17-23, 1977, ACCRA, GHANA, p.192.

B. THE SEARCH FOR AN APPROPRIATE TITLE

One of the preliminary issues which confronts scholars in the quest for an African Christian theological expression of faith in God through Jesus Christ is the choice of an appropriate title. The question has rightly been asked: "Should we speak of 'African Theology', Theologia Africana, 'African Christian Theology' or 'African Theologies'?"¹

Agbeti has argued that the phrase "African Theology" should be distinguished from Christian theology in order to show its meaning as "interpretation of the pre-Christian and pre-Moslem African people's experience of God."² If the term is understood in this way, Kato may not be totally wrong in calling it "the Theology of African Traditional Religions."³

Furthermore, Turner contends that the phrase 'African Theology' is not a very helpful one. He states his position as follows:

The term is viewed with suspicion because the interest in traditional religion associated with it calls up in the minds of many a return to paganism The phrase "an African theology" has about it, therefore, the quality of a slogan of vindication. It refers to the attempts to find points of similarity between Christian notions and those drawn from the traditional religions of Africa.

1 Edward W. Fasholé - Luke, "The Quest for African Christian Theologies," SCOTTISH JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY, 29 No.2 (April 1976), p.161.

2 John K. Agbeti, "African Theology: What It Is," THEOLOGICAL PITFALLS IN AFRICA, p.54.

3 Byang H. Kato, THEOLOGICAL PITFALLS IN AFRICA, p.55.

Second, it refers to the hope that the systematic theology expressed in the language and concepts of traditional religion and culture, may one day be written The phrase implies in its popular usage an attempt to amalgamate elements of Christian and elements of traditional belief. 4

Turner's castigation of "African Theology" as a 'theology of continuity and amalgamation' is at best uncritical. His view is not shared by other writers who use the expression to convey the idea of Christian theology in an African context.⁵ It must however be admitted that the vagueness of the phrase 'African Theology' certainly contributes to its being identified with other non-Christian theologies in Africa. Therefore it is necessary to qualify the term to read 'African Christian theology'.

If what has been said above provides enough clue for the rejection of the term 'African Theology' as an inappropriate title, then, its plural form 'African Theologies' should not be encouraged for the same reason.

The next title is 'Theologia Africana'. This Latin phrase is also used as a theological label which covers the subject of the contextualization of the Christian Message in Africa.⁶

4 Philip Turner, "The Wisdom of the Fathers and the Gospel of Christ: Some Notes on Christian Adaptation in Africa," JOURNAL OF RELIGION IN AFRICA, 4 (1971), pp.64-65.

5 Cf. John Mbiti, NEW TESTAMENT ESCHATOLOGY IN AN AFRICAN BACKGROUND: A STUDY OF THE ENCOUNTER BETWEEN NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY AND AFRICAN TRADITIONAL CONCEPTS, pp.185ff. Aylward Shorter, AFRICAN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY, pp.23f.

6 Cf. Kwesi A. Dickson, "Towards a Theologia Africana," NEW TESTAMENT CHRISTIANITY FOR AFRICA AND THE WORLD, pp.198-208.

Fasholé-Luke admits the possibility of the usefulness of the phrase because it has "a respectable ancestry; in view of immense contribution of North African theologians, notably, Tertullian, Cyprian, Augustine, and Donatus, to the development of Early Latin Theology."⁷ However, Fasholé-Luke sees the use of the term as an additional ambiguity.⁸

There is hardly any objection to a theologian or a student of theology who may insert into his or her writing such a phrase as 'Theologia Africana', perhaps as the best expression he or she could think of or to show his or her familiarity with some Latin terms. But how does 'Theologia Africana' taken as a title for Christian theology in Africa help to convey the spirit of the contextualization of the Christian faith in Africa? Is it not an irony when some of these theologians who rightly reject the use of Latin as a liturgical language for African Christians turn round to designate their theology of "indigenization" as 'Theologia Africana'? The overwhelming use of the English language by Africans writing on the subject is already a matter of great concern.⁹ Furthermore, Latin is no longer a language of everyday communication, not even for the citizens of Rome, and it may not be resurrected to be an 'Empire language' for Africans.

7 Fasholé-Luke, loc. cit.

8 Ibid.

9 Cf. Adrian Hastings, AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY: AN ESSAY IN INTERPRETATION, pp.57-58.

Thus, 'Theologia Africana' as a title is not helpful either and should be rejected.

In order to reduce the task of identifying the kind of theology that some Christians inside and outside Africa are advocating, particularly for Christians in Africa, it is logically necessary to call it "African Christian theology". This title immediately suggests that the type of theology is 'Christian theology' or at least it declares itself to be so. This theology is not on the same wavelength as non-Christian theologies in Africa, for example, Theology of African Traditional Religions and Islamic Theology.

In the phrase, "African Christian theology", the term 'African' is used not because one pretends to overlook the fact that there is no such thing as a homogeneous culture for all Africans but for the following reasons:

1. The use of the term is an expression of solidarity with the experiences and aspirations of those who inhabit that part of God's world.
2. The word, 'African', is intended to point to the fact that inspite of the differences and diversities that exist in that continent, there are experiences and certain forms of life-style that are common characteristics of the people of that land.¹⁰

10 Cf. E. Bolaji Idowu, "The Relation of the Gospels to African Culture and Religion," JESUS AND MAN'S HOPE, p.263.

3. The expression may serve to remind the African convert that to become a Christian does not imply an abolition of the Africanness of his or her being.¹¹

4. The term may prove to be a useful reminder and a challenge to the African Christian to recognize as well as accept his or her responsibility to that continent and the world at large, on behalf of Christ.

Perhaps it is necessary to make further clarification about the use of the expression "African Christian theology". The phrase in its singular form does not obscure the fact that there can be and certainly there ought to be a pluriform of African Christian theology. Just as there are many versions of Christian theology in other parts of the world, Christian theology in Africa cannot be one type.¹² Besides, no single individual has ever succeeded in producing just one theology in any serious theological engagement. Furthermore, in Africa as Hastings rightly observes: "The size of the Christian Community in Africa, the variety of denominational experiences, the immense variations between the human situation, the political and economic pressures - all this requires a pluralism of African theological experience and expression."¹³

11 Cf. Louis J. Luzbetak, THE CHURCH AND CULTURES: AN APPLIED ANTHROPOLOGY FOR THE RELIGIOUS WORKER, p.344.

12 Cf. Hastings, op. cit., p.50.

13 Ibid.

The development of African Christian theologies which are at once Biblical and primarily meaningful as well as relevant to the Church in Africa and its life situation is a necessary undertaking. Pope Paul VI's prophetic statement to the Bishops of Africa in his 1969 Kampala address still rings in the minds of many Christians in the continent of Africa.

He says:

The expression, that is the language and mode of manifesting the One Faith, may be manifold; hence it may be original, suited to the tongue, the style, the character, the genius and the culture of the one who professes this One Faith. From this point of view, a certain pluralism is not only legitimate but desirable. An adaptation of the Christian life in the fields of pastoral, ritual, didactic and spiritual activities is not only possible, it is even favored by the Church. The liturgical renewal is a living example of this. And in this sense you may, and you must, have an African Christianity. 14

These words are not only encouraging but challenging.

God's decisive action in the self-giving of himself as Jesus of Nazareth must be interpreted in terms that are comprehensible and pertinent to African life and experience. The task is urgent and could be regarded as one of the greatest needs of the Church in Africa, that is, "the need to develop a theology for Africa which is both uncompromisingly biblical and authentically African."¹⁵

But what factors necessitate the call for this type of theology?

14 Cited by Aylward Shorter, AFRICAN CULTURE AND THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH, p.219.

15 Dick France, "Christianity on the March: The View of an Outsider on the Future of Christianity in Africa," THIRD WAY, 1 No.21 (3 Nov. 1977), p.6.

C. FACTORS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE DEMAND FOR AFRICAN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGIES

1. The Need For A Theology Which Takes The African Context Into Account

Scores of Africans will ever remain grateful to many Euro-American Missionaries for their invaluable contribution to the well-being of the continent of Africa. At the same time, the part played by most of these Missionaries, especially those of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in the rejection, destruction and captivity of traditional African cultures and religions has led to the 'alien character' of Christianity in Africa.¹ These missionaries, with only a few exceptions, "laboured under the assumption that Africans were without religion, education or culture and that Africa provided a virgin field where they could sow the seeds of Western religion and civilization."² In their opinion, the African, prior to the advent of Christianity and Islam, lived in 'a sea of superstitious beliefs' which have no real contents.³

1 Cf. Edward Fasholé-Luke (ed.), CHRISTIANITY IN INDEPENDENT AFRICA, pp.357f.

2 Ram Desai (ed.), CHRISTIANITY IN AFRICA AS SEEN BY AFRICANS, p.13. Cf. Mokgethi Motlhabi (ed.), ESSAYS ON BLACK THEOLOGY, p.2; Cf. Max Warren, SOCIAL HISTORY AND CHRISTIAN MISSION, p.75.

3 Cf. Kofi Appiah-Kubi, "Jesus Christ - Some Christological Aspects from African Perspectives," AFRICAN AND ASIAN CONTRIBUTIONS TO CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY, pp.51ff. Also Ezekiel C. Makunike, "Evangelism in the Cultural Context of Africa," INTERNATIONAL REVIEW OF MISSIONS, 63 (January-October 1974), pp.58ff.

This unfortunate view about the African and his traditional cultures could not only be attributed simply to the "arrogance and intolerance" of Missionaries. They were human beings and consequently culturally-conditioned. They were subject to the beliefs and philosophies of their time.⁴ They shared in the limitations of knowledge about other peoples outside their own localities. They had, at least initially, enormous problems of communication in a language and culture other than their own.⁵

These limitations are real and cannot be seriously doubted. However, this attitude of rejection, condemnation, and sometimes abrogation, of essentials of African heritage has contributed to the 'Foreignness' of Christianity in Africa.⁶ It was not an exaggeration when Westermann commented as follows:

The Churches that go to Africa have one thing in common: they represent and spread occidental forms of Christianity. . . . Christianity in Africa should be African and not European; this point is of such paramount importance that in future the missionary will have to listen still more attentively to the voice of Africa, so as to give the African full freedom in shaping Christian thought and life according to his own genius, and to give him that help and guidance, but also the chance of free initiative, which he is entitled to expect in the days of his coming of age. 7

4 Elliot Kendall, THE END OF AN ERA: AFRICA AND THE MISSIONARY, pp.53-60.

5 Ibid.

6 Cf. Adrian Hastings, CHURCH AND MODERN MISSION IN AFRICA, pp.60ff. Also Mark E. Glasswell and Edward W. Fasholé-Luke (eds.), NEW TESTAMENT CHRISTIANITY FOR AFRICA AND THE WORLD, pp.199ff.

7 Diedrich Westermann, AFRICA AND CHRISTIANITY, p.185.

Among the things which Westermann strongly feels African Christians would demand from Missionaries is: "Respect for their racial heritage as it is expressed in social institutions and the African style of life. These are part of God's creation; they may need purification and may undergo modification, but to disregard or denounce them is to take away from the African what God has given him."⁸

Could it be said that European Missionaries in Africa did not at some point of their missionary enterprise generally recognize this fundamental mistake of rejecting African world-view? At the International Missionary Council held in Le Zoute, Belgium in 1926, one of the Missionaries who spoke on "The Relation of the Church to African Customs" remarked:

Our missions have an experience of over a century now, and more or less definite rules have been laid down and followed. On the other hand, I am more and more conscious that those decisions were taken by our predecessors in greater or less ignorance. They did not know what those customs meant; they did not know the Africans. We know the facts far better than they knew them, and cannot but ask ourselves, shall we continue to follow their rules? ⁹

The Conference resolved the matter as follows:

"Everything that is good in the African's heritage should be conserved, enriched and ennobled by contact with the Spirit of Christ."¹⁰ The Customs were classified into three main categories:

⁸ Ibid., pp.185-186.

⁹ Edwin W. Smith, THE CHRISTIAN MISSION IN AFRICA: A STUDY BASED ON THE WORK OF THE INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE AT LE ZOUTE, BELGIUM, SEPTEMBER 14th TO 21st, 1926, p.49.

¹⁰ Ibid., p.50.

- (1) "Customs which are evil - these the Church cannot sanction.
- (2) Customs which are not incompatible with the Christian life - these should not be condemned.
- (3) Customs whose accidents are evil but whose substance is valuable - these may be purified and used." 11

The Council agreed that on the basis of the size of Africa and the diversity of its customs, each missionary in his own ecclesiastical territory would decide what should be banned or encouraged."¹²

They could not have done better than what they did, which ought to be seen as a commendable effort in view of their historical circumstance. But how far has the implementation of that noble resolution gone? The present situation by which scholars inside and outside Africa are calling for more positive action on the subject justifies the suggestion that the implementation of such a hopeful declaration has yet a long way to go in Africa.¹³

Resolutions and statements of good intentions on the matter did not stop with those of 1926 referred to above. For example, it was about the middle of this century that an Enlarged Committee of the International Missionary Council at Willingen issued the following

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 For example: Kwesi Dickson and Paul Ellingworth (eds.), BIBLICAL REVELATION AND AFRICAN BELIEFS, 1969. Adrian Hastings, AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY, 1976. Claude Geffré and Bertrand Lunéan (eds.), THE CHURCHES OF AFRICA: FUTURE PROSPECTS, 1977. Edward Fasholé-Luke, (ed.), CHRISTIANITY IN INDEPENDENT AFRICA, 1978.



statement:

While the Church of Christ in any place and at any time must exhibit the marks without which it will not be a Church, it has the responsibility to exhibit them in a distinctive way, incorporating into the service of Christ whatever heritage of cultural values it may have been given by God's grace. This is not being 'rooted in the soil' but related to the soil. The Church can only be rooted in Christ. But the eternal Gospel must be so presented to men and women that its contemporary and compelling relevance is recognized. It cannot be so recognized as long as it appears in foreign guise, imitating and reproducing the characteristics of a Church in some remote and alien land. Foreign in one sense the Church must always be; its citizenship is in heaven and it is an agent of transformation. Despite the dangers of identification with this world, we urge that foreignness in the more earthly sense of the word is something to be outgrown with all possible speed.

Churches should take a positive yet critical attitude to national cultures. We recognize, of course, the intimate dependence of these cultures on religious and philosophical conceptions which differ fundamentally from the basic tenets of the Christian faith. But we believe that Churches have the right and duty to make captive to Christ such elements of these cultures as can serve as vehicles of Christian truth. This must be done not in a spirit of compromise or superficial adaptation of 'the scandal of Christianity' to non-Christian forms of thought. 14

Christianity in Africa is still beclouded with 'foreign garments' which hide its essential nature. Addressing the 1975 International Conference of Academics and Churchmen in Jos (Nigeria), Ayandele lamented in words that appeal to the minds of many African Christians who are yearning for a more direct encounter with the Lord vis-à-vis their own traditional heritage:

14 Norman Goodall, MISSIONS UNDER THE CROSS: ADDRESSES DELIVERED AT THE ENLARGED MEETING OF THE COMMITTEE OF THE INTERNATIONAL MISSIONARY COUNCIL AT WILLINGEN, IN GERMANY, 1952; WITH STATEMENTS ISSUED BY THE MEETING, p.196.

To date cultural imperialism pervades many facets of organized Christianity in Africa - the priestly robes, liturgy, prayer-books, theology, hymnology, even mannerisms The Christianity of the Bible does not necessarily lose its universality or sacredness by bearing the imprint of the African, his emotions, his intense yearning to see God, through African-based forms and formularies which would elicit the best of his spiritual nature and resourcefulness. 15

Following the successful renunciation and abandonment of his traditional African religio-cultural background, the African convert was presented with a 'theological package' which the Gospel-bearer brought from abroad. The 'parcel' contained theological formulations by non-African theologians and Churchmen who responded to specific religio-cultural and socio-political crises of faith in God which were largely peculiar to their time and circumstance. Unfortunately, those theologies largely include questions and answers about God, the earth and man, which the average African convert not only finds difficult to comprehend but are mostly less relevant and meaningless to his spiritual yearnings and needs.¹⁶ The widely cited words of Taylor are perhaps relevant at this point. He states:

Christ has been presented as the answer to the questions a white man would ask, the solution to the needs that Western man would feel, the Saviour of the world of the European world-view, the

15 E. A. Ayandele, "Address," CHRISTIANITY IN INDEPENDENT AFRICA, p.613.

16 Cf. Bengt Sundkler, THE CHRISTIAN MINISTRY IN AFRICA, pp.281ff. Bolaji Idowu, TOWARDS AN INDIGENOUS CHURCH, pp.22ff.

object of the adoration and prayer of historic Christendom. But if Christ were to appear as the answer to the questions that Africans are asking, what would he look like? If he came into the world of African cosmology to redeem Man as Africans understand him, would he be recognizable to the rest of the Church Universal? And if Africa offered him the praises and petitions of her total, uninhibited humanity, would they be acceptable? 17

By way of re-emphasizing one's appreciation of the difficulties that Missionaries encounter in their struggle to communicate the Gospel, it should be noted that many of them rightly consider themselves as instructors under obligation to help the convert grow towards Christian maturity. Perhaps in pursuing that aim they regarded the theologies which they brought as 'ministerial tablets' which the new convert ought to swallow unimpaired. In addition, administrative and pastoral duties of all sorts encourage the method of passing on intact to the African only 'what has been received'.¹⁸

Furthermore, even when the missionary has the genius and time to develop a more responsible Christian theology for converts in a particular historico-cultural situation, there is another problem. The Missionary has to face the challenge that might come from his or her Directors who constantly monitor whatever he or she teaches from an 'Overseas ecclesiastical switch-board' located far away from the scene of action and the arena of confrontation with actual life-issues.¹⁹

17 John V. Taylor, THE PRIMAL VISION: CHRISTIAN PRESENCE AMID AFRICAN RELIGION, p.16.

18 Cf. Harold F. Guite, "Culture and Mission," THEOLOGICAL BULLETIN, 3 No.6 (May 1975), p.9.

19 Cf. John S. Mbiti, "Christianity and Traditional Religions in Africa," INTERNATIONAL REVIEW OF MISSIONS, 59 No.236 (October 1970), pp.439f.

Nevertheless, the fact still remains that Christian theology in Africa is largely a deposit of different doctrinal statements representing the various foreign denominations that are operating in the continent of Africa. In schools and Colleges, Universities and Seminaries, where Christian theology is taught and studied, the text-books are those imported from Europe and America,²⁰ It is not surprising then, that speaking about Christian theology in Nigeria, Idowu could write as follows:

Is it not sad to say that after one hundred and twenty (and probably considerably more) years of Christianity, the Church in Nigeria has not developed a theology which bears the distinctive stamp of Nigerian thinking or meditation? Theologically, she has been spoonfed by Europeans all along. Her theology is book theology; that is, what she reads in books written by European theologians, or what she is told by Europeans, undigested in preaching and teaching. 21

Since the publication of the book in which Idowu made the above observation, the theological situation of the Church in Nigeria as well as other parts of Africa has not changed substantially. The need for Christian theologies which take the African context into consideration is increasingly felt and discussed especially in books, Conferences and Seminars on Christianity in Africa.²² One writer has recently commented that the Church in

20 Idowu, loc. cit.; Cf. "Transplantation from the West," STUDY ENCOUNTER, 12 No.3(1976), p.45.

21 Ibid., pp.22-23.

22 A few examples of such books include: C. G. Baeta (ed.), CHRISTIANITY IN TROPICAL AFRICA; T. A. Beetham, CHRISTIANITY AND THE NEW AFRICA; Edward Fasholé-Luke (ed.), CHRISTIANITY IN INDEPENDENT AFRICA; Adrian Hastings, AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY; Aylward Shorter, AFRICAN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY.

Africa "needs theology, its own African, Christian theology. Until it has it, while it may continue to grow in numbers, it will not grow in influence on the new Africa, and it will be increasingly dismissed as a hangover from the Colonial past."²³

This pungent remark should not be taken lightly but treated as a timely suggestion which requires urgent positive action. To take the African world-view and the self-understanding which arises out of the Weltanschauung into consideration is a sine qua non for successful theologizing in Africa.²⁴ The slowness of the Church in Africa to realize this and act more decisively in its theological enterprise has contributed to its present crises of identity in the continent. The question is increasingly being asked, whether the Church in African is God's Church or an 'Ecclesiastical Colony' or 'the White Man's Church'?²⁵

Furthermore, it has been suggested that the unfortunate approach which neglected traditional African views of the world and life in general in the presentation of the Gospel of Christ has contributed to the superficiality of the average African Christian commitment to Christ: "For years, many sensitive pastors/

23 Dick France, "Christianity on the March: The View of an outsider on the future of Christianity in Africa," THE THIRD WAY, 1 No21 (3 Nov. 1977), p.6.

24 Cf. Osadolor Imasogie, "Christian Apologetic Theology in a West African Context," being a paper delivered at the WATTI, Ibadan, (September 10, 1974), pp.8ff.

25 Cf. Byang H. Kato, AFRICAN CULTURAL REVOLUTION AND THE CHRISTIAN FAITH, pp.32ff. J. C. Thomas, "What Is An African Theology?", GHANA BULLETIN OF THEOLOGY, 4 No.4 (June 1973), p.16.

theologians in Africa have noticed that in times of existential crises, the average African Christian reverts to the traditional African religious practices. In some instances pastors/priests (theologians, if you please) have themselves fallen victim of this almost irresistible reaction to existential confrontation."²⁶

The traditional religious beliefs which shape the African self-understanding are so real to most Africans that any suggestion to discard them completely certainly gives birth to ambivalent attitudes.²⁷ On one hand, the average African convert sees Christianity as the religion which is valid within certain limits; on the other hand, his traditional beliefs and practices provide solutions to other crises of life which the new Faith cannot cope with. This problem is more succinctly described in the following words:

. . . . in the subconscious recesses of his being, the African Christian saw the "God" of Christianity as a "stranger-God" who is unfamiliar with the local spiritual problems Thus in the period of boundary-situation problems, the first reaction of the African Christian is to gravitate towards the traditional religious methods for coping with such crises. 28

26 Osadolor Imasogie, "Guidelines for Christian theology in Africa," p.88.

27 Ibid., pp.88f. Cf. Kwesi Dickson and Paul Ellingworth, BIBLICAL REVELATION AND AFRICAN BELIEFS, pp.13f.

28 Imasogie, "Guidelines for Christian theology in Africa," p.90. Also, Okot p'Bitek, AFRICAN RELIGIONS IN WESTERN SCHOLARSHIP, p.113 - "It is a fact that the vast majority of Africans today hold the beliefs of their religions. Christianity has barely touched the core of the life of most African peoples It seems to me that the new God of Christianity was taken by many African peoples as just another deity, and added to the long list of the ones they believed in. So that many African Christians are also practitioners of their own religions."

The Church in Africa is under obligation to respond to crises either within its own life or from its environment. The Church has to answer questions concerning its rightful identity. This response ought to commence with self-examination. Precisely, for the Church in Africa, one area of this self-questioning is about its theology. It is contended that an 'X-ray' of Christian theology in Africa has shown a weak point. The Church has not given proper attention to the African world-view in its theological enterprise. Consequently, the present theologies are unable to cope adequately with the questions and problems that beset its members.²⁹

By implication of the foregoing presentation, a first-rate priority item on the theological agenda of the Church in Africa should not be an endless reproduction of Euro-American versions of Christian theology. With reference to the Bible and in dialogue with relevant non-African Christian theologies, the Church in Africa will have to theologize within the African world-view of life. In doing so, the Church will respond more adequately and vigorously to the spiritual and material crises that affect the African well-being and the entire human community.

29 Cf. Bolaji Idowu, *op. cit.*, pp.45f.

2. THE DYNAMIC NATURE OF THEOLOGICAL DISCOURSE

There is another factor which motivates the current quest for African Christian theologies. The demand for such theologies partly comes out of the growing realization that theological discourse is non-static. What then is theology? Or, more specifically, what is Christian theology? In pursuing the answer to this question, it is not pretended that there is a universally acceptable definition of the phrase 'Christian theology.' But an attempt must be made to show the idea conveyed by the term, especially as such meaning contributes to the understanding of the dynamic nature of theological enterprise.

Christian theology is "a translation . . . an ever-renewed re-interpretation to new generations and peoples of the given Gospel, a re-presentation of the will and the way of one Christ in a dialogue with new thought-forms and culture patterns."³⁰

This definition discloses certain facts about Christian theology. First, Christian theology is not a once-and-for-all enterprise, worked out neatly in one generation which is to be presented intact to every other generation and situation. It is subject to continual renewal and re-interpretation.³¹ Secondly, the definition points to the centrality of the Gospel of Christ in theological discourse. The Christian theologian

30 Bengt Sundkler, THE CHRISTIAN MINISTRY IN AFRICA, p.281.

31 Ibid.

seeks to interpret God's will as revealed decisively in the person of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. The primary data does not come from stories about certain invisible and imaginary deities but from one God, creator of Heaven and Earth, who became visible in the person of Jesus Christ and who continues to manifest himself as the Holy Spirit.³² Thirdly, Christian theology must be expressed constantly in and through "new thought-forms and cultural patterns" in order to be more meaningful and more relevant.³³

The above basic meaning of Christian theology serves as a springboard for the discussion that now follows.

The fact that Christian theology is subject to revision and re-interpretation points to the dynamic nature of theological discourse. In the first place, no Christian theologian can sincerely claim to have written the last word to be spoken on all the doctrines and beliefs of the Church.³⁴ Most theologians, if not all, will admit that he or she is caught up within the limitations of his or her physical, mental and spiritual ability.³⁵ A profound insight on this issue comes from Moltmann in these words:

The theologian is a strange creature: he is obliged to talk about the God who is unconditionally present to all men in all times and all places, but he is himself only a man who is limited in his capacities and who is conditioned in his views by his own tradition and culture As I am not an Angel

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

34 Cf. Kenneth Y. Best (ed.), AFRICAN CHALLENGE: MAJOR ISSUES IN AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY, p.60.

35 Cf. Karl Barth, THE WORD OF GOD AND THE WORD OF MAN, p.186.

but only a man, my perspectives are very limited. They are European and white, protestant and middle-class, out of the twentieth century (I hope), and are ultimately determined by my personal experiences and private limitations. They have, therefore, only limited value and can only suggest to other theologians from other lands and Churches and cultures that they look in the same direction from their points of view toward the God who has brought us into this community and who will bring us to a better community. 36

The clarity and comprehensibility of the above words do not invite further expatiation on the quotation. However, the testimony introduces the next point, namely that the historical and cultural conditioning of the theologian is another factor which indicates his or her inability to write the last word about any doctrine of the Church. The theologian is incapable of theologising outside the influence of cultural elements such as language, concepts and meaning which are non-static but at the same time constitute necessary tools for the theologian's theological engagement.³⁷ Insofar as it is impossible to theologise in a cultural vacuum, there cannot be a final interpretation of the Gospel message.³⁸ Having said this, it should be noted that there is no attempt to undermine the enduring value of some of the interpretations of the Christian Message by theologians of different generations. However, any

36 Jürgen Moltmann, "Christian Theology and its Problems Today," REFORMED WORLD, 32 No.1(1972), p.5.

37 Ibid.; Cf. John Macquarrie, PRINCIPLES OF CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY, pp.11f.

38 Cf. Best (ed.), Loc. cit.; John Macquarrie, THE FAITH OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD: A LAY THEOLOGY, pp.2-4.

impression that such interpretations are 'canonized texts' which either 'supplement' or 'replace' the Holy Scriptures must be rejected. Theological formulations or interpretations of the Holy Scriptures are subject to revision, re-wording, and sometimes rejection in view of better insights, changing meaning and situation. This position is further buttressed by the words of Macquarrie:

Ancient interpretations of faith that have become part of the very texture of the Community's identity, such as the Apostles' creed or the doctrine of the Trinity, cannot be set aside without destroying the Community, but they need continual reinterpretation Each generation must appropriate the tradition, and in order to do this it has to interpret the ancient formula, or whatever it may be, into its own categories of thought. 39

The suggestion that no given theologian has the final word about the doctrines of the Church is lastly confirmed by the fact that the meaning and implications of the Gospel of Christ cannot be exhausted in any theological treatise either formulated by combined effort of all Church members or compiled by an individual theologian within the Church.⁴⁰ The writer of the Epistle to the Romans gives a clue to this point when he says: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!"⁴¹

39 Macquarrie, PRINCIPLES OF CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY, pp.11-12.

40 Cf. H. Kraemer, THE CHRISTIAN MESSAGE IN A NON-CHRISTIAN WORLD, pp.63, 73.

41 Romans 11:33 (R.S.V.). Cf. Ephesians 3:8, 20; Psalms 92:5.

The richness of the Gospel rules out any possibility of 'draining' its contents at any period of the Church's theological reflection.

There is another indication of the fact that meaningful theological enterprise is dynamic in character. The Gospel of Christ has to be incarnated in every culture and appropriated by each generation for the unveiling of its power and usefulness.⁴² This Gospel is "the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith"⁴³ and "the word of God" which cannot be fettered⁴⁴ successfully in one particular culture or imprisoned in one period of human history. The incarnation of the Son of God sets the crucial and dramatic example for the continuing incarnation of God's saving message in every culture. Beetham's helpful insight on this matter deserves attention:

At the heart of the Christian faith lies the statement, 'The Word became flesh' The Faith delivered to the Saints is an Eternal Word of God, unchangeable. The manifestation of that Word was in the flesh of a man of the Jewish people in the first century AD. There can then be only one theology, understood more clearly as succeeding generations of Christians from different backgrounds bring to its study light shed through their own experience by the Spirit of truth. Yet the Word becomes incarnate for each generation, and if it is to be 'touched and handled' so as to be universally recognised, it must be incarnate in the language and life of every people. In this sense, there is need for an African liturgy and an African (Christian) theology. 45

42 Cf. T. A. Beetham, CHRISTIANITY AND THE NEW AFRICA, pp.45ff.

43 Romans 1:16 (R.S.V.).

44 2 Timothy 2:9 (R.S.V.).

45 Beetham, op. cit., p.46.

The struggle to incarnate the Gospel runs through the history of Christendom.⁴⁶ This is summed up as follows: "In the course of history, Christian truth has taken upon itself various incarnations. It did this in the historical development of the first centuries, in Augustine's philosophy of history, in the mediaeval synthesis of Christian, Greek and Germanic elements, and in the various national expressions of Christianity in Protestantism."⁴⁷

The fact remains that Christian theology loses its relevance when it ceases to communicate with its 'target audience'.⁴⁸ It must therefore be undertaken again and again, seeking creative ways and means of effectively presenting the Gospel to every age and new situation.⁴⁹ This is not an encouragement to uncritical theological innovation which may further hide the truth, but an indication that theological discourse cannot remain the same in the face of changing cultural forms and the emergence of new problems and better insights for more productive theological reflection.⁵⁰

One more factor which points to the dynamic nature of theological undertaking is the continuing Presence of the Holy Spirit as the One who leads into all truth.⁵¹ The Lord Himself has promised in these words: "But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send

46 Kraemer, op. cit., pp.312f.

47 Ibid., p.312.

48 Cf. Osadolor Imasogie, "Christian Apologetic theology in a West African Context," pp.8f.

49 Cf. Clark H. Pinnock, "Evangelical Theology - Conservative and Contemporary," THEOLOGICAL BULLETIN, 4 No.6(May 1978), pp.6-15.

50 Cf. Ibid.

51 John 16:13 (R.S.V.).

in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you."⁵² He says also: "I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth . . . and he will declare to you the things that are to come."⁵³

If the promise of God's illuminating Presence is taken seriously, then Christian theology cannot be a once-and-for-all enterprise. The words of the Living Christ as quoted above draw attention to the fact that interpretation of biblical revelation for the benefit of the individual, the Church and the world at large, is an on-going undertaking. The Presence of the Holy Spirit adds renewal and re-interpretation of God's saving message for each society and for each generation.

One implication of what is said above is that dogmatic inflexibility on the part of any theologian or the Church as a whole cannot be truly regarded as faithfulness to the Gospel of Christ.⁵⁴ Neither a reprint of all the theologies of the Church Fathers nor a reproduction of nineteenth-century contextualized theology to be 'rehearsed' at each new situation could serve as a legitimate sign of the Spirit's continuing work in the Church.⁵⁵ The invaluable

52 John 14:26 (R.S.V.).

53 John 16:13 (R.S.V.).

54 Cf. Pinnock, op. cit., p.6.

55 Cf. Ibid.

contributions of past generations of theologians notwithstanding, there is still a vital need for more openness to the Spirit of God who continues to provide the illumination for creative exegesis and application of the Holy Scriptures to contemporary issues and problems which are peculiar to each believing community.⁵⁶

By now, it should have become clearer that the current quest for African Christian theologies is by no means an extension of what might be called a 'high-level patriotic nationalism' of a twentieth-century African, but a genuine concern to assist the African Christian in the struggle to fulfil the purpose of his or her existence. African Christian theologies therefore attempt to translate and interpret the Gospel Message in ways that are intelligible and essential to every area of the African Christian's existence. The task is an all-embracing one, covering all areas of life. This requires each student of African Christian theology to identify his or her own theological priority through the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the experience of other believers.

This discussion must move on to consider South African Black Theology in relation to other African Christian theologies.

56 Cf. Ibid., pp.14-15.

D. IS BLACK THEOLOGY IN SOUTH AFRICA AN ASPECT OF AFRICAN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY?

Today, it may be rightly proposed that any serious discussion on the nature of African Christian theologies ought to include an attempt to clarify the place of South African Black theology in the quest for relevant Christian theologies in Africa. The demand for such clarification arises out of the fact that there appears to be certain confusion about their relationship. On one hand there are those who contend that Black theology in South Africa is not on the same wavelength as African Christian theologies.¹ The main reason for stressing their so-called unrelatedness is that Black theology in South Africa is concerned only with the liberation of Blacks in Southern Africa, while African Christian theologies, coming mainly from the East and West African Countries, attempt to recover the traditional African world-view.² This study will not subscribe to such a view as it amounts to a misrepresentation of Black theology and other Christian theologies in Africa.

On the other hand, it is suggested that Black theology in South Africa is an authentic phase of African Christian theology.³ Tutu has argued that "African (Christian) theology is like the outer and

1 Cf. Byang Kato, THEOLOGICAL PITFALLS IN AFRICA, pp.48-49.

2 Ibid.

3 D. M. B. Tutu, "African Theology and Black Theology: The Quest for Authenticity and the Struggle for Liberation," AFRICAN CHALLENGE: MAJOR ISSUES IN AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY, p.63.

larger circle and Black theology is like the inner and smaller circle in a series of concentric circles."⁴ In other words, South African Black theology is not a theology that is set in opposition to other African Christian theologies, nor is it parallel to them. It is one of the African Christian theologies with a particular emphasis.⁵

At this point, it is pertinent to examine more closely the nature of South African Black theology in order to do justice to the question under consideration, namely, 'Is Black Theology in South Africa an aspect of African Christian theology?' If this approach is taken seriously, then an obvious starting point towards an objective understanding and a fair appreciation of Black theology in South Africa is to attempt to summarise the situational factors which contribute to the birth and development of the theology. At the same time, it should be noted that there is no attempt to overlook any difficulties that may arise in presenting a summary of a well-known - but complex - condition of Blacks in Southern Africa. For there is, at least, the risk of over-simplification of a situation which is almost impossible to reduce adequately to words. However, in order to minimize that difficulty, one has to rely mainly on the accounts of those who are partakers as well as victims of the condition. An additional advantage in paying attention to their testimonies is to avoid passing a comment that is governed solely by prejudice and guesswork.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

The situational factors within Southern Africa which contribute to the birth and development of South African Black theology could be summarised as follows:

1. The Socio-political, religio-cultural and economic conditions of the Black man in South Africa.

In the words of Ntwasa and Moore, the South African Black man is

excluded from making the most basic decisions that affect his own life - where he will find shelter; where and what and how he will find work for his food and drink; how he will organise his life together with others. All these sorts of decisions are made for him; he has simply to obey. And the decisions that are made for him are seldom, if ever, the decisions he would have made for himself If he does not obey the decisions made by an authority far beyond his influence he knows that he will be locked in prison, banned, house arrested or will simply 'disappear'. 6

Under the oppressive policies of Apartheid government in South Africa, most Black South Africans constitute the congregation of the neglected poor, the exploited and oppressed people, the object of hatred, scorn and laughter.⁷ They are forced to be the 'blood-sweating' labourers and full-time servants without any real measure of freedom.⁸ They are the helpless masses, like sheep without a shepherd compelled to live each day as though they have been abandoned and forsaken by the One God who is the Creator, the Maker of heaven and earth, the Lord of the Universe and the Saviour of Mankind.⁹

6 Sabelo Ntwasa and Basil Moore, "The Concept of God in Black Theology," BLACK THEOLOGY: THE SOUTH AFRICAN VOICE, pp.23-24.

7 Cf. Ibid.

8 Cf. Steve Biko, "Black Consciousness And The Quest For A True Humanity," BLACK THEOLOGY: THE SOUTH AFRICAN VOICE, pp.36ff.

9 Ibid. It should also be noted that most of the essays in BLACK THEOLOGY: THE SOUTH AFRICAN VOICE provide information about the situation of the oppressed poor (mostly Blacks) in South Africa.

This dreadful situation includes compulsory separation of husbands from their wives and children from their parents.¹⁰

The problems and experiences of torture, pain, suffering, dehumanisation and despair of the oppressed people (mostly Blacks) in South Africa form a compelling factor for the development of Black theology in that region.¹¹

2. The need to assist victims of oppression to re-assert their basic human dignity and self-identity.

One of the sad effects of the long period of systematic brutalisation and humiliation of the Black man in South Africa is the weakening or perhaps the loss of his human dignity and self-identity. The oppressive and dehumanising system has forced many of the Blacks to resign into an "awful sense of self-hatred and self-disgust which are the ghastly consequences of oppression."¹² In a policy of persecution and torture unto death primarily on the basis of the colour of one's skin,¹³ it is not difficult to appreciate the pitiable condition of the oppressed man yielding to persistent demands to accept the values that are callously assigned to his humanity. Many of the Blacks have "come to doubt the reality of their own personhood and humanity. They have often come to

10 Cf. Allan Boesak, "Liberation Theology in South Africa," AFRICAN THEOLOGY EN ROUTE: PAPERS FROM THE PAN-AFRICAN CONFERENCE OF THIRD WORLD THEOLOGIANS, DECEMBER 17-23, 1977, ACCRA, GHANA, pp.170-171.

11 Cf. Basil Moore, "What is Black Theology?" BLACK THEOLOGY: THE SOUTH AFRICAN VOICE, pp.2-7.

12 Desmond Tutu, "The Theology of Liberation in Africa," AFRICAN THEOLOGY EN ROUTE: PAPERS FROM THE PAN-AFRICAN CONFERENCE OF THIRD WORLD THEOLOGIANS, DECEMBER 17-23, 1977, ACCRA, GHANA, p.167.

13 Cf. Steve Biko, *Loc, cit.*

believe that the denigration of their humanity by those who oppress them is the truth about themselves."¹⁴

Black theology in South Africa responds to this situation and positively declares its stand as exemplified in the following words: "The Black man must be enabled through the interpretation and application of the Gospel to realise that blackness, like whiteness, is a good natural face cream from God and not some cosmological curse."¹⁵

As long as the Gospel of Christ is sufficient for every human situation and need, then it is appropriate to assert that "a relevant message of the Gospel is that which not only helps the black man to regain his self-confidence and respect as a human being, but which focuses attention on the removal of the dehumanising facets of modern life."¹⁶

3. The need for a better image of the Church and the Gospel of Christ in South Africa.

The Apartheid regime has its deadly effect not only on the suffering South African Black masses but the system has marred the image of the Church and the Gospel of Christ.¹⁷ Those who are

14 Desmond Tutu, "The Theology of Liberation in Africa," AFRICAN THEOLGY EN ROUTE: PAPERS FROM THE PAN-AFRICAN CONFERENCE OF THIRD WORLD THEOLOGIANS, DECEMBER 17-23, 1977, ACCRA, GHANA, p.163.

15 Manas Buthelezi, "An African Theology or a Black Theology?" BLACK THEOLOGY: THE SOUTH AFRICAN VOICE, p.35.

16 Ibid., p.34.

17 Cf. Trevor Huddleston, NAUGHT FOR YOUR COMFORT, pp.18f.; Allan Boesak, op. cit., p.174f.

perpetrators of the policy of Apartheid not only claim to be members of God's Church but they speak of God as one who has ordained their policy of inhuman exploitation through separate development.¹⁸

Thus, a leading Afrikaner, Treurnicht, is quoted as saying: "I know of no other policy as moral, as responsible to Scripture as the policy of separate development"¹⁹

Treurnicht is certainly not alone in the fraudulent attempt to identify God as the Author and guardian of Apartheid. Most Afrikaners assert that God has ordained Apartheid from the beginning of his creative activities as witnessed to in the Genesis accounts of Creation.²⁰ Apartheid, therefore, should be protected by all means.²¹ It is not surprising then that the protagonists of Apartheid have persistently defied world opinion for so long and have continued to inflict physical and mental pain, as well as death upon helpless masses.²²

In claiming Scriptural support for a system that systematically brutalizes the weak and the poor, God is falsely accused of unjust oppression. He is unfaithfully presented as a 'tribal deity'. The character of his Church is tarnished together with a distortion of his Gospel.²³ This lamentable situation is perhaps illustrated in the

18 Cf. Charles Villa-Vincencio, "South Africa's Theologized Nationalism," THE ECUMENICAL REVIEW, 29 (1977), pp.373ff.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.; Cf. Trevor Huddleston, op. cit., pp.58-79;
B. B. Keet, WHITHER - SOUTH AFRICA? pp.20ff.

21 Charles Villa-Vincencio, loc. cit.

22 Ibid.

23 Cf. Ibid.; Trevor Huddleston, loc. cit.;
Sabelo Ntwasa and Basil Moore, op. cit., pp.23-28.

words of a sympathetic South African Dutch Reformed theologian:

Has the Church in South Africa become unfaithful, only because it supports and encourages with hardly any criticism Apartheid in South Africa? No, by no means. Our guilt lies in the fact that we have deified Apartheid in order to preserve ourselves. The Church has become unfaithful because we have elevated our nationalism to the plane of God; because we allow our own little kingdom to become more important than the Kingdom of Heaven, because we have become callous and because we do not seek after the things which are of God but after the things which are of man We have nationalised the heavenly God, we have reduced Him to be our tribal god. We believe that God is concerned only about us, that He brought us here in particular and that all other peoples are intruders, that we are His own people and that others have no claim to Him. 24

For those who are genuinely concerned for a positive change in the above situation, the task of interpreting the Gospel of Christ in a way that does justice to the credibility of biblical witness to who God is and his perfect love for all mankind becomes very urgent. In response to this challenging condition, Black theology in South Africa includes in its theological assignment such themes as Concepts of God,²⁵ the nature of the Church²⁶ and the Liberation of the Oppressed.²⁷

24 M. J. Redelinghuys, "The Church in South Africa," DELAYED ACTION!: AN ECUMENICAL WITNESS FROM THE AFRIKAANS SPEAKING CHURCH, pp.103-104.

25 For example, "The Concept of God in Black Theology" by Sabelo Ntwasa and Basil Moore in BLACK THEOLOGY: THE SOUTH AFRICAN VOICE, pp.18-28.

26 Sabelo Ntwasa, "The Concept of the Church in Black Theology," BLACK THEOLOGY: THE SOUTH AFRICAN VOICE, pp.109-118.

27 The subject, "Liberation," stands central in the current Black Theology in South Africa. A notable example is the Collection of Essays that constitute the book, BLACK THEOLOGY: THE SOUTH AFRICAN VOICE, Also, Desmond Tutu, "The Theology of Liberation in Africa," AFRICAN THEOLOGY EN ROUTE. . . .," pp.162-168; Allan Boesak, *ibid.*, pp.169-175.

Having briefly outlined some of the situational factors that have encouraged the development of South African Black theology, the next step is to discuss further the meaning of this theology as seen mainly by the writers of the theology.

At the Transvaal Regional Seminar on Black Theology which was held at Hammanskraal in 1971, it was resolved that Black Theology is "not a theology of absolutes, but grapples with the existential situation. Black theology is not a theology of theory, but a theology of action and development. It is not a reaction against anything - except irrelevancy - but an authentic and positive articulation of our black experiences."²⁸

The above declaration sets the tone for a theology that attempts to outline the implication of the Gospel of Christ for the issues of life that people face. One of the fundamental problems that receives immediate attention in South African Black theology is the liberation of the oppressed people in Southern Africa. Thus, Moore speaks of Black theology as a theology that is "in revolt against the spiritual enslavement of black people, and thus against the loss of their sense of dignity and worth. It is a theology in search of new symbols by which to affirm black humanity. It is a theology of the oppressed, by the oppressed for the liberation of the oppressed."²⁹

28 Cited by Mokgethi Mofokeng, "Black Theology: A Personal View," in BLACK THEOLOGY: THE SOUTH AFRICAN VOICE, p.80.

29 Basil Moore (ed.), BLACK THEOLOGY: THE SOUTH AFRICAN VOICE, p.ix (preface).

Has the Gospel of Christ any relevance for those who are oppressed? Without any hesitation, advocates of South African Black theology answer this question in the affirmative. The Gospel of Jesus Christ of Nazareth contains both the message of deliverance and the power to set free those who are held in captivity.³⁰ God is not only the Creator of those who are enslaved by their fellowmen but he remains as ultimate liberator and sustainer.³¹ This he has demonstrated in the deliverance of Israel from bondage and most decisively in his self-giving as Jesus Christ of Nazareth for the salvation of mankind.³² God's saving action therefore includes liberation from physical and spiritual bondage.³³ Consequently, the victims of oppression are reminded that God is still in control of his universe and has the power to liberate the down-trodden.

Those who painfully go through life each day as though suffering, torture and poverty constitute the only ingredients of life need to be told very plainly that God is genuinely concerned about their deliverance. Such a message not only strengthens the weak and the powerless, it further sharpens their appreciation of God's love and the worthiness of his Gospel.

Black theology in South Africa looks beyond the liberation of those Blacks who are enslaved. There is also a yearning for the

30 For example, Mokgethi Motlhabi, *op. cit.*, pp.77-80.

31 Desmond Tutu, *Loc. cit.*; Allan Boesak, *Loc. cit.*;
Mokgethi Motlhabi, *Loc. cit.*

32 *Ibid.*

33 *Ibid.*

betterment of the entire South African society.³⁴ This aspiration for a healthy and harmonious South African Community is summed up in the words of one of the writers of Black theology:

What we need is a spiritual and political Exodus out of the situation of oppression toward a situation of liberation, out of the situation of inhumanity, darkness and hatred toward a situation in which we, both whites and blacks, can regain our common humanity and enjoy a meaningful life, a wholeness of life that has been destroyed. 35

The life that Christ has come to give more abundantly³⁶ is to be joyfully and meaningfully celebrated. The attempt to interpret the Gospel of Christ which aids the removal of the obstacles that hinder the full celebration of the God-given life is one priority item in the theological agenda of South African Black theology.

Thus, on the basis of the foregoing discussion on Black theology in Southern Africa, this essay will not hesitate to say that South African Black theology is a vital aspect of African Christian theology. If Christian theology in Africa is a reflection upon the Gospel for God's glory³⁷ and for the benefit of the individual Christian, the Church and mankind as a whole, then

34 Cf. Steve Biko, *op. cit.*, p.47.

35 Allan Boesak, *op. cit.*, p.173.

36 John 10:10 (R.S.V.). ". . . . I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

37 I Corinthians 10:31 (R.S.V.). " Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."

Black theology has taken a decisive step in seeking to serve South African society. A meaningful Christian theology ought to include an interpretation of the Gospel of Christ in a way that God's Power and Love become manifest in the daily problems and opportunities that confront people.

E. SOURCES OF AFRICAN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

An essay on the nature of African Christian theologies, no matter how brief, is incomplete without at least a survey of sources. Such an undertaking is inevitable insofar as formative factors of theological discourse, to a large extent, determine the character of the theologies.¹

The following considerations are essential elements in the development of Christian theologies in Africa:

1. God's Word as mediated by the Holy Spirit.²

In support of this claim, Imasogie rightly quotes the words of Jesus Christ himself in which he says:

I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak of his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said he will take what is mine and declare it to you. 3

This quotation underscores the significance for writers of Christian theology to remain tuned to the Holy Spirit in their theological enterprise.⁴

1 Cf. John Macquarrie, PRINCIPLES OF CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY, pp.4f.

2 Cf. Osadolor Imasogie, "Guidelines for Christian theology in Africa," p.95.

3 John 16:12-15 (R.S.V.).

4 Imasogie, loc. cit.

2. The Holy Scripture.

The Bible as the cardinal living record of God's revelation to man is the primary objective source of African Christian theologies.⁵ The Holy Scripture as God's inspired word⁶ for man's total life is an indispensable formative factor in Christian theological undertaking. It is perhaps this recognition of the centrality of the Bible in Christian theological reflection that has prompted the Pan African Conference on 'Third World' theologians to declare categorically that "No theology can retain its Christian identity apart from the Scripture."⁷

This view has earlier been echoed by Macquarrie when he contended that "in the Christian community, any theology which claims to be Christian theology (as distinct from someone's private philosophy of religion) must maintain close and positive relations with the Bible."⁸

The fact that the Scriptures not only testify to God's redemptive activities in the past but also contain God's message for today and tomorrow requires that Christian theologians are under obligation to theologise in harmony with the witness of the Scriptures.⁹

5 Ibid., pp.95-96.

6 2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21.

7 "Final Communiqué: Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians, December 17-23, 1977, Accra, Ghana," in AFRICAN THEOLOGY EN ROUTE, p.192.

8 Macquarrie, op. cit., p.9.

9 Cf. "Final Communiqué: Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians," op. cit., pp.192-193.

Furthermore, the Bible as the written Word of God remains resourceful for every human situation. As the writer of the Second letter to Timothy puts it: "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work."¹⁰

This timeless value of the Holy Scripture demands that the theologian searches the Bible afresh with the guidance of the Holy Spirit in order to know what God has to say in each life-situation.¹¹

3. African Traditional Religions and Philosophies.

African religious traditions and patterns of thought are considered to be one of the sources of African Christian theologies.¹² The Christian theologian who desires to produce Christian theologies that are primarily intended to respond to specific needs of African Christians must not ignore such traditional religious beliefs and philosophies that persist in the lives of the people.¹³ In other words, the development of Christian theologies that are particularly relevant and intelligible to the African demands, among other things, an objective consideration of African religious concerns and life-style.¹⁴

10 2 Timothy 3:16-17 (R.S.V.).

11 Imasogie, op. cit., p.96.

12 Cf. Edward Fasholé-Luke, "The Quest for African Christian Theologies," SCOTTISH JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY, 29 No.2(April 1976) pp.169f. "Final Communiqué: Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians" loc. cit.

13 Cf. Ibid.

14 Cf. John Mbiti, "Some African Concepts of Christology," CHRIST AND THE YOUNGER CHURCHES, p.52.

The theologian, for example, would need to acquaint himself with African understanding of God, divinities, spirits, ancestors, man, and earth and other realities that help shape the African life and world-view.¹⁵ Such a study might reveal certain Biblical themes that have hitherto remained dormant in the Church's theological reflection.¹⁶ Besides, Africans, like most people who are confronted with the claims of Christ, largely comprehend the Christian message through their traditional thought-forms.¹⁷

Although it is suggested here that African traditional religions and philosophies provide vital contextual data for Christian theology in Africa, the insights derived from such religio-cultural experiences do not constitute the sole formative factor for African Christian theologies. In fact, a theology that is developed on the basis of African traditional experiences of God alone falls short of being called Christian theology insofar as Biblical revelation is left out.¹⁸ At best, such a theology is a theology of African Traditional Religions.¹⁹ One will have to insist that any profitable insights derived from the study of African religious experiences and cultures have to be developed in the light of the teachings of the Holy Scriptures and relevant dogmatic tradition of the Church.

15 Cf. Ibid.

16 Cf. Aylward Shorter, AFRICAN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY - ADAPTATION OR INCARNATION?, pp.31f.

17 Cf. Mbiti, loc. cit.

18 Cf. Imasogie, op. cit., pp.96-97.

19 Cf. Shorter, op. cit., p.27.

4. The theological heritage of the Church through the Centuries.

The Church through the ages has produced a vast amount of theologies covering a wide range of Biblical themes which cannot be ignored altogether by writers of African Christian theologies. Mbiti's remark in this connection is worth noting: "The older Churches, especially in Europe, have a rich inheritance of theological thought, scholarship, tradition, instrumenta studiorum, all of which we must utilize, since these are resources that the Church through the ages has gathered and produced."²⁰

This is not a call for a reproduction of some or all of the theological works of the Church throughout its history. The statement is consonant with the recognition that the Church in Africa has much to learn from the contributions of men and women who have endeavored to systematise their understanding of the Christian message.²¹

It follows then that one of the viable options before those who are involved in writing African Christian theologies is to engage in a critical dialogue with relevant Christian theologies that have emerged in the history of the Church. The pursuance of that task helps the Church in Africa to learn from the talents of other believers whose apprehension of the Christian Message forms a vital part of Africa's theological heritage. At the same time, the dialogue may unveil the theological contribution of Christians in Africa to the Church at large.²²

20 Mbiti, op. cit., pp.51-52.

21 Cf. Ibid.

22 Cf. Shorter, op. cit., pp.29ff.

5. African Independent Churches.

The Churches founded by Africans without the initiative of foreign missionaries "have developed through their long history a type of worship, organization, and community life rooted in African culture and touching the daily life of the people."²³ Their experiences provide relevant data for developing African Christian theologies.

The foregoing sources of African Christian theologies do not exhaust the list of formative factors of such theologies. For as the Church in Africa strives to realize the purpose for which it has been called into being, it will acquire living experiences relating to its total life and ministry which will undoubtedly provide both the incentive and the raw material for its theological undertaking. The Church would have to remain sensitive to contemporary African cultures in order to utilize any useful data which will encourage fruitful theological discourse.

23 "Final Communiqué: Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians," loc. cit., Edward Fasholé-Luke, op. cit., pp.171f.

F. CONCLUSION

The present-day search for African Christian theologies has at least grown out of two factors. These are the need for Christian theologies which take the African context seriously and the increasing awareness of the fact that theological discourse is non-static.

In faithful reference to Biblical revelation and critical dialogue with relevant non-African Christian theologies, the Church in Africa will have to theologise with African world-view and life. The theologies that will emerge will correspond to the variety of needs and living experiences of the Church in Africa.

Some of the sources of such Christian theologies are the Word of God as mediated by the Holy Spirit, the Holy Scriptures, African Traditional Religions and Philosophies, the theological heritage of the Church through the centuries and the experiences of the African Independent Churches.

These are enormous tasks before the Church in Africa. One of the assignments is the continuing production of Christian theologies that are primarily intelligible and relevant to the total life of that continent.

CHAPTER TWO

AFRICAN IDEAS OF GOD AND MAN WITH SPECIAL
REFERENCE TO NIGERIAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION

CHAPTER TWO

AFRICAN IDEAS OF GOD AND MAN

WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO NIGERIAN TRADITIONAL RELIGIONS

I. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this chapter is to show those ideas of God and man in African traditional religions which are helpful in the development of an African Christian doctrine of the Church. Since this dissertation proposes that ecclesiology has its root in the doctrines of God and man, the need to examine African traditional concepts of God and man is obvious. An understanding of such ideas is essential to the development of a relevant and intelligible ecclesiology for the African Christian.

The presentation of the concepts of God and man will necessarily be limited to selected aspects. This writer confesses his lack of ability to cover all the details of African or Nigerian traditional ideas of God and man. Assuming that there is the potential to undertake such an arduous task, one cannot escape the limitation imposed by the required length of this type of dissertation. Furthermore, it is doubtful whether all the details of African traditional notions of God and man are essential to the realization of the purpose of this study.

If the need to treat only a selected aspect of the doctrines of God and man is clear, then the choice of those ideas of God and man to be considered is largely dictated by the degree of their relevance to the thesis under consideration.

Next, as pointed out earlier in Chapter one,¹ complexities and diversities in African traditional religions do not rule out the existence of certain religious beliefs and life-styles which are common to the people.² Even in Nigeria, the traditional religions of the different tribal groups who inhabit that country are not identical. There are significant differences in religious beliefs and practices. At the same time, what often strikes a note of excitement and interest in the mind of a student of African or Nigerian traditional religions is equally the overwhelming commonality in certain aspects of the religious beliefs and life-styles of the different tribal communities.³ For example, the belief in one Supreme Being and his manifold intermediaries, Cosmic God-Consciousness which forms the core of everyday life, the idea of religion covering every area of life or the absence of any solid line of demarcation between secular and sacred dimensions of life, the concept of man as both an individual and a social being, and the emphasis on communal life-style.⁴

1 Supra, p.45.

2 Cf. Geoffrey Parrinder, AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION, p.11.

3 Cf. E. Bolaji Idowu, "The Relation of the Gospels To African Culture And Religion," JESUS AND MAN'S HOPE, pp.263ff.; Osadolor Imasogie, "Christian Apologetic Theology In A West African Context," pp.9f.

4 Cf. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "The Value Of African Religious Beliefs And Practices For Christian Theology," AFRICAN THEOLOGY EN ROUTE, pp.110ff.; Elliott Kendall, THE END OF AN ERA: AFRICA AND THE MISSIONARY, p.96; Malcolm J. McVeigh, GOD IN AFRICA: CONCEPTIONS OF GOD IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION AND CHRISTIANITY, p.180.

There are other preliminary remarks on this chapter. The intellectual battle on whether the African man had any ideas of God at all, prior to the advent of Christianity and Islam, appears to have ended with the recognition that such ideas exist. This victory for common sense has to be so, insofar as no human being created in the image of the one true God can exist without any ideas of this God, no matter how distorted. God always takes the initiative to disclose himself to his creatures. This truth of God's unveiling of himself before his creatures is eloquently testified to in the Holy Scriptures. For example, the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans declares:

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. 5

If God has not left himself without witness in the world that he has brought into being, then Africans, like other creatures of this one God, have ideas of him. Therefore, the task on hand here is far from being a discussion of the possibility of an African conception of God in African traditional religions, with particular reference to Nigerian traditional religions.

5 Romans 1:19-20 (R.S.V.); Cf. Acts 14:17; Psalms 19:1-6; Emil Brunner, REVELATION AND REASON: THE CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE OF FAITH AND KNOWLEDGE, pp.262ff.

Scholars on African traditional religions, anthropologists and ethnographers have produced valuable works on traditional African concepts of God.⁶ It is not intended in this chapter to produce another treatise on African ideas of God, either to complement, replace or compete with the existing contributions that have so far been made. This writer strongly contends that the time has come for students of Christian theology, particularly in Africa, to utilize the findings of these scholars for fruitful theological reflection. Such students do not have to become, first of all, anthropologists, ethnographers or etymologists before using relevant data on African traditional religions. One can only admit that it is highly essential that such students possess adequate background to be able to handle the materials critically and objectively.

What follows now is the carrying out of the task of outlining such traditional beliefs about God and man that have ecclesiological import. In doing this, one is greatly indebted to the many scholars of African traditional religions whose works are invaluable to this study.

6 For example, Edwin W. Smith (Ed.). AFRICAN IDEAS OF GOD: A SYMPOSIUM; John S. Mbiti, CONCEPTS OF GOD IN AFRICA; E. Bolaji Idowu, OLÓDUMARÈ: GOD IN YORUBA BELIEF; Malcolm J. McVeigh, GOD IN AFRICA: CONCEPTIONS OF GOD IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION AND CHRISTIANITY; Daryll Forde (Ed.), AFRICAN WORLDS: STUDIES IN THE COSMOLOGICAL IDEAS AND SOCIAL VALUES OF AFRICAN PEOPLES; J. B. Danquah, THE AKAN DOCTRINE OF GOD.

II. AFRICAN TRADITIONAL IDEAS OF GOD

A. THE ATTRIBUTES OF GOD

1. God as Creator of the Universe

The belief in a Supreme God who is the sole Creator of heaven and earth is a common feature of many traditional religions of Africa.¹ The idea of God as Creator is affirmed through direct declaration that God made all things and through specific names assigned to God which convey the fact that God is the Creator.² The concept is also expressed through the prayers of the people to God as Maker of all things.³

Among the Yorubas of Nigeria, Olódùmarè⁴ is the source of all things.⁵ By the initiative and power of Olódùmarè, "everything in heaven and on earth" came into existence.⁶ Farrow, commenting on the Yoruba traditional concept of the Supreme God, notes that God is "conceived as being the Author of all creation"⁷

1 Cf. John S. Mbiti, CONCEPTS OF GOD IN AFRICA, p.45; Secretariatus Pro Non-Christianis, MEETING THE AFRICAN RELIGIONS, p.44.

2 Mbiti, CONCEPTS OF GOD IN AFRICA, pp.45ff.

3 Ibid.

4 One of the names of the Supreme God among the Yorubas of Nigeria.

5 E. Bolaji Idowu, OLÓDÙMARÈ: GOD IN YORUBA BELIEF, p.39.

6 Ibid.

7 Stephen S. Farrow, FAITH, FANCIES AND FETICH OR YORUBA PAGANISM: BEING SOME ACCOUNT OF THE RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OF THE WEST AFRICAN NEGROES, PARTICULARLY OF THE YORUBA TRIBES OF SOUTHERN NIGERIA, p.32.

According to Nadel, a foremost article of the Nupe creed (of Nigeria) is "the belief in God-the-Creator."⁸ Nupes believe that "God was in the beginning, before the appearance of man and the creation of nature, being himself the Creator of all things"⁹ The phrase "all things" includes good and evil things, as expressed in one of the Nupe songs: "'A being which God did not create, neither did the world create it . . . ; Should you do anything that is beautiful, God has caused it to be beautiful; Should you do anything evil, God has caused it to be evil.'"¹⁰ God's creative activity continues as nothing ever comes into being without him.¹¹

The Ibos of Nigeria identify the Supreme God as Chi-ne-ke which literally means "the Creator God."¹² He is also known as Chukwu, "the Great God."¹³ As Chi-ne-ke, God is the "author of heaven and earth who makes animal and plant life grow. As the source of human life, he gives to each man at the time of his birth that man's particular portion of the divine being called Chi."¹⁴

In his book, GOD IN NIGERIAN BELIEF, Idowu states: "God in Nigerian belief is the Universal God. He is the Creator, the One who brought all things into being."¹⁵ The world, the rains and everything that exists are created by the Supreme God.¹⁶

8 S. F. Nadel, NUPE RELIGION, p.13.

9 Ibid., p.12.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Edmund C. O. Ilogu, CHRISTIAN ETHICS IN AN AFRICAN BACKGROUND: A STUDY OF THE INTERACTION OF CHRISTIANITY AND IBO CULTURE, p.34.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 E. Bolaji Idowu, GOD IN NIGERIAN BELIEF, p.12.

16 Ibid.

The Mende people of Sierra Leone believe that the Supreme God, Ngewo, is "the Creator of the World and all that is in it."¹⁷ As the Supreme Chief and Ruler of the World, Ngewo created the universe, human beings - their customs and regulations - animate and inanimate objects which inhabit the universe.¹⁸ Nothing, either good or bad, can take place outside his authority and permission.¹⁹ Parrinder observes that Ngewo is the one Being whose existence is from the beginning and who is responsible for creating "all life, of the invisible world and men and the invisible spirits."²⁰

Among the Ashanti of Ghana, Busia reports that the "Great Spirit, the Supreme Being" is the Creator of "all things" including a "pantheon of gods" and "lesser spirits."²¹ One of the titles of the Supreme Being is "Bore-Bore, the First, the Creator of all things" that exist.²²

Kwoth (God) in Nuer traditional religion, is the Maker of the Universe.²³ As Creator and Cause of all things, Kwoth is invoked in

17 W. T. Harris and Harry Sawyer, THE SPRINGS OF MENDE BELIEF AND CONDUCT: A DISCUSSION OF THE INFLUENCE OF THE BELIEF IN THE SUPERNATURAL AMONG THE MENDE, p.2.

18 Ibid., p.5.

19 Ibid.; Cf. K. L. Little, THE MENDE OF SIERRA LEONE: A WEST AFRICAN PEOPLE IN TRANSITION, pp.217-218.

20 E. G. Parrinder, AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION, p.33.

21 K. A. Busia, "The Ashanti," AFRICAN WORLDS: STUDIES IN THE COSMOLOGICAL IDEAS AND SOCIAL VALUES OF AFRICAN PEOPLES, p.191.

22 Ibid., p.192.

23 E. E. Evans-Pritchard, NUER RELIGION, p.4.

prayers as "Kwoth ghaua, Spirit of the Universe, with the sense of Creator of the Universe."²⁴ The Nuer view concerning God as Creator may be summed up as follows:

The heavens and the earth and the waters of the earth, and the beasts and birds and reptiles and fish were made by him, and he is the Author of Custom and tradition Everything in nature, in culture, in society, and in men is as it is because God made or willed it so. 25

God, for the Nuer people, is the Author of all Creation.²⁶

Wagner, in his essay, "The Abaluyia of Kavirondo," asserts that "the idea of God as the Creator both of the world and of man finds such numerous expressions in stereotyped prayers and sayings that there can be no doubt that it is a very firmly established belief and of basic significance for the whole world view of the Abaluyia."²⁷ While there are different accounts on how God created the Universe and everything that is included in creation, the Abaluyia hold that all things owe their origin to God.²⁸

The preceding survey of the concept of God as Creator in African traditional religions does not include accounts of how God carried out his work of creation. Such ideas could be interesting and may provide useful data for theological discourse. However,

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid., pp.6-7.

26 Ibid.

27 Gunter Wagner, "The Abaluyia of Kavirondo,"
AFRICAN WORLDS: STUDIES IN THE COSMOLOGICAL IDEAS
AND SOCIAL VALUES OF AFRICAN PEOPLES, p.28.

28 Ibid.

for this present study, it is sufficient to indicate that at least some Africans in their traditional worldview have an idea of a Supreme God who is always the Maker of all the things that exist.

2. God as sustainer of the whole creation

In the traditional religions of many tribes in Africa, the Supreme Being is held to be the sustainer of all things.¹ The Edos of Nigeria give names to people which testify to this particular attribute of God. For example, the Edo name, Osadolor-Agbonyi, literally means "it is God who sustains and renews the universe."² This name conveys the fact that God supervises, re-structures and maintains all the things that he has created.³

Arinze points out that among the Ibos of Nigeria the Supreme Being is "Osebuluwa (Lord who upholds the world)."⁴ God's attribute as Sustainer of life is also portrayed in names given to children among the Ibos. One illustration is "Chukwuka-Odinaka (it is all in God's hands);"⁵ Everything in creation is maintained by the power of God.⁶ Basden also remarks that the Ibos believe in a Supreme Being who is "beneficent in character" and controller of "all things" in the entire creation.⁷

1 Cf. Geoffrey Parrinder, RELIGION IN AFRICA, pp.39f.; John S. Mbiti, AFRICAN RELIGIONS AND PHILOSOPHY, pp.41f.

2 Osadolor Imasogie, Class lecture on "African Traditional Religion", 1973-74.

3 Ibid.

4 Francis A. Arinze, SACRIFICE IN IBO RELIGION, p.9.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 G. T. Basden, AMONG THE IBOS OF NIGERIA, p.215; Cf. Basden, NIGER IBOS, pp.36f.

The Supreme Being in the conception of the Kalabari people (Nigeria) is the sustainer and maintainer of life.⁸ He creates and protects the individual.⁹

God in Yoruba traditional theology is "the Fountain of all benefits. He is the Author and Giver of all the good things that man can possess - children, wealth, possessions, good living, good character, everything that exists for the benefit of man . . . , both divinities and men draw from His inexhaustible providence."¹⁰ All the existing things function only on the basis of the sustaining power of the Supreme Being.¹¹ In an earlier work, Smith observes that Yorubas believe that the Supreme Being "not only creates but keeps, cares and gives food, rain and light of the Sun."¹²

Ideas of God among the Idomas of Nigeria include an awareness that the whole world cannot last a second if God should withdraw his support.¹³ There is life only as God allows it to be.¹⁴

8 Robin Horton, "A Hundred Years of Change in Kalabari Religion," BLACK AFRICA: ITS PEOPLES AND THEIR CULTURES TODAY, p.196.

9 Ibid.

10 E. Bolaji Idowu, OLÓDUMARÈ: GOD IN YORUBA BELIEF, p.53.

11 Ibid.; Cf. Idowu, AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION, pp.156f.

12 Edwin W. Smith, AFRICAN BELIEFS AND CHRISTIAN FAITH: AN INTRODUCTION TO THEOLOGY FOR AFRICAN STUDENTS, EVANGELISTS AND PASTORS, p.48.

13 Cf. Idowu, GOD IN NIGERIAN BELIEF, p.11.

14 Ibid.

In similar vein the Nupes of Nigeria believe that God controls and directs the course of this world.¹⁵ God pursues this task mainly through his divine agents.¹⁶

Parrinder points out that in African traditional religions God is not only the "pre-eminence and sole creator", he is the upholder of all things.¹⁷

From his intensive study of African traditional religions, Mbiti notes that there is a widespread belief that God "provides for the things He has made, so that their existence can be maintained and continued. He provides life, fertility, rain, health and other necessities needed for sustaining creation."¹⁸

Juok (God), in the understanding of the Shilluk people of the Upper Nile, is the one being who preserves the world and "informs it in its entirety."¹⁹ The whole world and everything that it contains is upheld by Juok, the Supreme God.²⁰

According to Nuer notions of God, he is the bestower and guardian of life.²¹ Nuer people hold the belief that they are able to "herd

15 S. F. Nadel, NUPE RELIGION, p.13.

16 Ibid.

17 Parrinder, op. cit., pp.39ff.

18 Mbiti, loc. cit.

19 Godfrey Lienhardt, "The Shilluk of the Upper Nile,"
AFRICAN WORLDS: STUDIES IN THE COSMOLOGICAL IDEAS
AND SOCIAL VALUES OF AFRICAN PEOPLES, pp.154-55.

20 Ibid.

21 E. E. Evans-Pritchard, NUER RELIGION, p.6.
Cf. Evans-Pritchard, "God In Nuer Religion,"
MAN'S RELIGIOUS QUEST, p.561.

cattle and cultivate millet and spear fish because God gave these things for their sustenance."²²

Douglas observes that the Lele of Kasai speak of Njambi (God) as the director, guardian and perfecter of the affairs of Lele people.²³ The animals of the forest are also under God's control and protection.²⁴ However, Lele people could kill these animals and eat them as part of God's provision for their daily bread.²⁵

The Zulus believe that Society is held together by God.²⁶ All the family and clan relationships only hold together because God gives his providential support.²⁷ God also ensures the fertility of the soil by providing rain and sunshine.²⁸ The whole Universe is under God's Supreme control.²⁹

God, for Lugbara people, is "the ultimate fountainhead of all power and authority, of all sanctions for orderly relations between men."³⁰ He is the co-ordinator of all the activities of men and their ancestors.³¹ In Lugbara belief, God's sustaining attribute

22 Ibid.

23 Mary Douglas, "The Lele of Kasai," AFRICAN WORLDS: STUDIES IN THE COSMOLOGICAL IDEAS AND SOCIAL VALUES OF AFRICAN PEOPLES, p.9.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Donald M'Timkulu, "Some Aspects of Zulu Religion," AFRICAN RELIGIONS: A SYMPOSIUM, p.15.

27 Ibid., pp.15ff.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 John Middleton, LUGBARA RELIGION: RITUAL AND AUTHORITY AMONG AN EAST AFRICAN PEOPLE, p.27.

31 Ibid., p.28.

is evidential in his response to sacrifices, purification rites, offering, divination, the crises of death, witchcraft and sorcery.³² The welfare of an entire tribe is guaranteed by God's providential concern.³³

The few examples indicated above confirm the suggestion that in African traditional religions there is a belief in a Supreme God who is both Creator and Sustainer of the Universe. God who brings everything into existence also sustains all that he has made.

32 Ibid., p.257.

33 Ibid., p.258.

3. God as supreme judge of all creatures

The idea of God as Supreme Judge of all creatures is widely acknowledged in African traditional religions.¹ The Supreme Being who is the creator and sustainer of the entire world also judges all creatures.²

The Ibos regard the Supreme God as the dispenser of "rewards and punishments according to merit."³ No wrongdoer can escape his judgement because he is just and fully aware of all secrets.⁴ Metuh reports that an Ibo man who feels cheated by his neighbour would say, "God will judge" or "Is God no longer awake?"⁵ One of the most obvious instruments of God's judgement is lightning.⁶ The death of any person killed by lightning is not mourned because such death is regarded as God's just visitation upon the person's sins or the consequence of the sins of the relatives.⁷ Similarly, misfortunes are usually attributed to God's judgement upon evildoers.⁸

1 Cf. Secretariatus Pro Non-Christianis, MEETING THE AFRICAN RELIGIONS, p.55; Edwin W. Smith, AFRICAN BELIEFS AND CHRISTIAN FAITH: AN INTRODUCTION TO THEOLOGY FOR AFRICAN STUDENTS, EVANGELISTS AND PASTORS, pp.66f.; John S. Mbiti, AFRICAN RELIGIONS AND PHILOSOPHY, pp.45ff.

2 Ibid.

3 G. T. Basden, AMONG THE IBOS OF NIGERIA, p.215.

4 G. T. Basden, NIGER IBOS, p.36.

5 E. Emefie Metuh, "The Supreme God in Igbo Life and Worship," JOURNAL OF RELIGION IN AFRICA, 5 (1973), p.4.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

In certain issues such as land cases or disputes arising from false and malicious slander, Ibos call upon God to arbitrate through one of his divine agents called Amadioha.⁹

The notion of God as the Supreme Judge is strong among the Yorubas. Olódùmarè is the Supreme Judge over all Creation.¹⁰ Both the divinities or divine intermediaries of Olódùmarè as well as human beings bring their cases and disputes before God for judgement and settlement.¹¹ Olódùmarè judges the character of every member of the human family. Since he is full of wisdom and sees everything, both hidden and open, nothing can escape his attention.¹² God's impartial judgement of people's character brings about either punishment or reward.¹³

Idowu rightly remarks that among the Yorubas there is a strong belief that "sinners will not go unpunished and judgement attends every form of sin."¹⁴ Nevertheless, there are instances when Yorubas find it difficult to tell the exact cause of certain afflictions from God, when a "moral offender" suffers; it is often said that the person is "under the lashes of Olódùmarè."¹⁵

9 Stephen N. Ezeanya, "God, Spirits and the Spirit World: With Special Reference to Igbo-Speaking People of Southern Nigeria," BIBLICAL REVELATION AND AFRICAN BELIEFS, p.37.

10 E. Bolaji Idowu, OLÓDÙMARÈ: GOD IN YORUBA BELIEF, p.42.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.; Cf. J. Omosade Awolalu, YORUBA BELIEFS AND SACRIFICIAL RITES, pp.15f.

The most fearful judgement, according to Yoruba belief, comes at the end of this earthly pilgrimage when every person will face the final verdict of Olódùmarè on the basis of each person's conduct while on earth.¹⁶ Sometimes, for fear of this ultimate judgement, persons about to die confess their sins in order to avoid the final wrath of God.¹⁷

In everyday speech of the Mende people, the idea of God as Supreme Judge is clearly evident. Harris points out that it is common to hear such phrases as: "God is Judge."¹⁸ Ngewo (God) is "the One Chief."¹⁹ He is the great Chief who has "the last word in a dispute."²⁰ As Supreme Judge, Ngewo can also serve as the Ultimate Witness.²¹ Therefore, when an individual who is on trial swears in Ngewo's name, the person is set free.²²

Among the Kono people of Sierra Leone, God who is the Supreme Judge identifies all wrong-doers and punishes them accordingly.²³

16 Ibid., pp. 197f.

17 Ibid.

18 W. T. Harris, "The Idea of God Among the Mende," AFRICAN IDEAS OF GOD, pp. 278, 280.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 W. T. Harris and Harry Sawyerr, THE SPRINGS OF MENDE BELIEF AND CONDUCT: A DISCUSSION OF THE INFLUENCE OF THE BELIEF IN THE SUPERNATURAL AMONG THE MENDE, p. 12.

22 Ibid.

23 Robert T. Parsons, "The Idea of God Among the Kono of Sierra Leone," AFRICAN IDEAS OF GOD, p. 269.

Some of the Kono people believe that when a person is struck by lightning, it is God's retribution for the sins committed.²⁴ At times, the Supreme Being may punish a woman by denying her the fruit of the womb.²⁵ In such a situation, the barren woman finds out from the traditional Priest the particular cause of the affliction.²⁶

Ideas of God among the Akan of Ghana include the fact that God rewards the righteous and punishes the guilty person.²⁷ While there are immediate penalties such as death, ill-health and ill fortune for individual acts of sin, God may withhold his rain in response to corporate disloyalty.²⁸

The Supreme Being in Ambo people's belief is the sole Ruler over all things. He employs the "aid of ancestral spirits" in governing the people.²⁹ God is considered to be the Supreme Judge who judges without fault.³⁰

The Abaluyia believe that a deviation from the laws of society which God has established brings God's judgement upon law-breakers.³¹

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 H. St. John T. Evans, "The Akan Doctrine of God," AFRICAN IDEAS OF GOD, p.251.

28 Ibid., pp.251-252.

29 G. W.Dymond, "The Idea of God in Ovamboland South-West Africa," AFRICAN IDEAS OF GOD, p.141.

30 Ibid., p.145.

31 Gunter Wagner, "The Abaluyia of Kavirondo," AFRICAN WORLDS: STUDIES IN THE COSMOLOGICAL IDEAS AND SOCIAL VALUES OF AFRICAN PEOPLES, p.43.

God also uses the services of his divine agents to bring about justice upon anyone who deviates from tribal laws and custom.³²

God's recompense for good and bad conduct is affirmed by the Nuer people.³³ Those who break the norms of behaviour which God has ordained for orderly living face the consequences sooner or later.³⁴ At the same time, a good deed cannot pass unrewarded because God is an impartial Judge.³⁵ Evans-Pritchard remarks that the Nuers are careful not to break the customs and laws that govern the individual and society for fear of God's retribution.³⁶ While there is this firm belief about God's inescapable judgement, his mercy is equally acknowledged. This is particularly evident when prayers and appropriate sacrifices are offered to God for removal of penalties.³⁷

Among the Chagga people, a man who does good, who avoids evil designs against anyone, who does not steal but gives honour and care to the elderly, is rewarded with cattle, goats and children.³⁸ A person who respects the laws and customs of the people has the blessings of God while the wrongdoer obtains punishment.³⁹ In his study on

32 John S. Mbiti, CONCEPTS OF GOD IN AFRICA, p.76.

33 E. E. Evans-Pritchard, NUER RELIGION, pp.16ff;
Also his article, "God in Nuer Religion,"
MAN'S RELIGIOUS QUEST, pp.567-570.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

38 Edwin W. Smith, AFRICAN BELIEFS AND CHRISTIAN FAITH:
AN INTRODUCTION TO THEOLOGY FOR AFRICAN STUDENTS,
EVANGELISTS AND PASTORS, p.66.

39 Ibid.

the idea of God as Judge in African traditional religions, Smith writes:

God is, then, the Law-giver and Judge. Laws may be made by men, but they are God's Laws. When men go against those Laws they will be troubled. The punishment may come from men, or it may be given by spirits, but God is at the back of them. The Laws are the Laws of God and the wrong-doer does wrong against God and for that reason the hand of God is against him. Such is the fixed belief of great numbers of Africans. 40

The significance of the concept of God as Supreme Judge in African traditional religions is summed up by Mbiti when he declares that the notion "strengthens traditional ethical sanctions, which in turn uphold community solidarity."⁴¹ Parrinder also echoes a similar view when he points out that for the African, God not only creates the world but he establishes "the laws of society and the existence of justice depends upon obedience to him"⁴²

God's providential care for the well-being of the individual and the society as a whole is compatible with his application of justice.

40 Ibid., pp.66-67.

41 John S. Mbiti, AFRICAN RELIGIONS AND PHILOSOPHY, p.46.

42 E. G. Parrinder, RELIGION IN AFRICA, p.41.

4. God as unique

In spite of the prominence attached to the intermediary divinities in African traditional religions, many tribes in Africa recognize the fact that the Supreme Being is unique, unequalled in everything.¹

In African traditional religions, Parrinder notes:

It is clear that God exists by himself, he is not the creature of any other being but is the cause of everything else. His pre-eminence and his greatness go together. But since he is greater than any other spirit or man, God is mysterious and nobody can understand him, he creates and destroys, he gives and takes away. God is invisible, infinite and unchangeable. 2

Among the Yorubas, it is believed that God alone "possesses superlative greatness and fullness of all excellent attributes."³ His name, Olódùmarè, conveys the idea that he is "unique in heaven and on earth, supreme over all."⁴ He is all-powerful and only by his will and permission can anything ever take place or cease to be.⁵ The power to make and unmake on earth and in heaven rests entirely in him.⁶

While the divinities and human beings make mistakes, God is infallible.⁷ He is perfect in knowledge and singular in his ability to see all things both hidden and open.⁸

1 Geoffrey Parrinder, RELIGION IN AFRICA, pp.27f., 39f.

2 Ibid., p.40.

3 E. Bolaji Idowu, OLÓDÙMARÈ: GOD IN YORUBA BELIEF, p.38.
Cf. J. Omosade Awolalu, YORUBA BELIEFS AND SACRIFICIAL RITES, p.14.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid., p.40.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., p.41.

8 Ibid.

The Nupe idea of God's uniqueness may be summed up in the words of Nadel:

God is all-powerful, as he is all-knowing;
there is only one God, and no other deities
exist; God was in the beginning, before the
appearance of man and the creation of nature,
being himself the creator of all things. 9

An Ibo acknowledgement of God's ultimate pre-eminence is conveyed in the title "Chukwuka" which literally means "God is greater."¹⁰ In power and wisdom, God has no equal.¹¹ Basden underscores this position in his statement that among the Ibos the Supreme Being is "All Powerful and overlords all inferior spirits."¹²

God's uniqueness is acknowledged by the Nuer people. One of the titles of God is "Kwoth me gargar, the Omnipresent God."¹³ He is the "limitless."¹⁴ God is everywhere "'like wind' and 'like Air'".¹⁵

Ngewo, God, has ultimate authority over the whole creation, according to Mende belief.¹⁶ As Supreme Chief and Ruler of the World,

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- 9 S. F. Nadel, NUPE RELIGION, p.12.
- 10 Francis Arinze, SACRIFICE IN IBO RELIGION, p.9.
- 11 Ibid., p.10.
- 12 G. T. Basden, NIGER IBOS, p.36.
- 13 E. E. Evans-Pritchard, "God In Nuer Religion," MAN'S RELIGIOUS QUEST, p.559; NUER RELIGION, by the same author, p.4.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 W. T. Harris and Harry Sawyerr, THE SPRINGS OF MENDE BELIEF AND CONDUCT: A DISCUSSION OF THE INFLUENCE OF THE BELIEF IN THE SUPERNATURAL AMONG THE MENDE, pp.3f.

Ngewo stands above all in power, majesty and splendour.¹⁷ From his throne of infinite grandeur, Ngewo sees everything and controls all things.¹⁸

One of the titles of God among the Zulus is "the Great Great One,"¹⁹ By this appellation, the incomparableness of God's superlative greatness is affirmed. He is Unique.²⁰

The idea of God as Unique finds expression also among the Akan peoples of Ghana. Nyankopon, God, is omniscient.²¹ He "knows or sees all"²² at all times, from every angle and in all circumstances.²³ Nyankopon is "He who is there now as from ancient times . . . He who endures for ever."²⁴ He is infinite, "much above all",²⁵ and can be seen wherever one goes.²⁶

At least one point emerges from what has been said above about the uniqueness of God in African traditional religions. It is the fact that God is Supreme over all his creatures. He has no equal

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., p.11.

19 Donald M'Timkulu, "Some Aspects of Zulu Religion,"
AFRICAN RELIGIONS: A SYMPOSIUM, p.14.

20 Ibid.

21 J. B. Danquah, THE AKAN DOCTRINE OF GOD: A FRAGMENT OF GOLD COAST ETHICS AND RELIGION, p.55.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid., p.62.

26 Ibid.

in heaven or on earth, being the only one in whom dwells supreme power, ultimate authority and full wisdom. He is beyond any adequate description, being clothed in infinite greatness and majesty.

B. THE FARNESS AND NEARNESS OF GOD

1. God's farness over-stated

Certain scholars, especially among European writers, tend to speak of the farness of God in African traditional religions to the exclusion of the idea of his nearness.¹ Commenting on Africa's religious heritage, Westermann writes: "The African's God is a deus incertus and a deus remotus: there is always an atmosphere of indefiniteness about him."² He goes further to suggest that the Supreme God's "remoteness makes it impossible that personal confidence or personal relation of any kind should exist between him and man."³

The first problem with Westermann's claim is his expression "the African's God."⁴ It is not at all clear what exactly he means by the phrase as he does not define the expression anywhere in the book. He appears to suggest in other pages of the same work that there is one God. For example, when making a point on the value of finding links between the African religious mind and the Christian Message, he says that "the African will immediately understand what the missionary means when he tells him that he has come to make him more fully acquainted with the God whom he and his fathers have known and

1 Cf. Malcolm J. McVeigh, GOD IN AFRICA: CONCEPTIONS OF GOD IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION AND CHRISTIANITY, pp.126f.

2 Diedrich Westermann, AFRICA AND CHRISTIANITY, p.74.

3 Ibid., p.75.

4 Ibid., pp.74ff.

acknowledged since time immemorial".⁵

In view of the fact that the phrase, "the African's God," conveys the implication that Africans have their own God while other peoples may have another God or Gods, the expression should not be encouraged. One may not hesitate in asserting that no serious monotheist will admit the existence of another God or Gods besides the Eternally-One God who has revealed himself most decisively in Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

Westermann's deus incertus and deus remotus has nothing to do with African traditional ideas of God. It would appear that Westermann arrived at his idea of a 'remote God' in African traditional religions from a false premise. He claims that God in African conception is "the God of the thoughtful, not of the crowd, of people whose mature observation, personal experience and primitive philosophy have led them to postulate a central and ultimate power who is originator of everything existing and in whose hands the universe is safe."⁶ Westermann's 'philosophical deity' is foreign to the African's religious mind.⁷ African traditional ideas of God do not originate from attempts to postulate the existence of an 'Abstract Power' but from the self-disclosing initiatives and activities of the only Living God.⁸

5 Ibid., p.73.

6 Ibid., p.65.

7 Cf. E. Bolaji Idowu, AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION: A DEFINITION, pp.144ff.

8 Ibid.; Psalms 19:1-6; Acts 14:171 Romans 1:19-20.

Danquah is therefore right in rejecting Westermann's concepts of deus incertus and deus remotus as inapplicable to the African world-view, where there is a recognition of the active presence of the Living God in the world which he has created.⁹

Little in his own study of the Mende of Sierra Leone says that after the Supreme God "made the world, he retired far into the sky."¹⁰ Although God sends his rain to fall upon the earth, he has virtually no "immediate contact"¹¹ with the human beings he has created.¹²

There are certain difficulties which prevent one from accepting Little's position. First, there are no reasons given for God's retirement. He thus makes it extremely difficult for one to know how he arrived at the conclusion that the Mende people believe that God retired from the world after his work of creation. Secondly, the nature of the 'retirement' is rather obscure. Little admits that, while Ngewo (God) has "retired far into the sky,"¹³ he is not "entirely unapproachable, however, and sometimes a prayer may be addressed directly to Him. Indeed, it is customary to end most supplications with the expression, Ngewo lama - 'God willing'."¹⁴

9 J. B. Danquah, THE AKAN DOCTRINE OF GOD: A FRAGMENT OF GOLD COAST ETHICS AND RELIGION, pp.12ff.

10 Kenneth Little, THE MENDE OF SIERRA LEONE: A WEST AFRICAN PEOPLE IN TRANSITION, p.218.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.; Cf. Kenneth Little, "The Mende in Sierra Leone," AFRICAN WORLDS: STUDIES IN THE COSMOLOGICAL IDEAS AND SOCIAL VALUES OF AFRICAN PEOPLES, pp.114ff.

He states further that in everyday life the Mende people approach Ngewo through intermediaries.¹⁵

If God is approached directly from time to time and more often contacted indirectly through intermediaries, as Little has suggested, then the meaning of 'God's retirement' needs further clarification to deserve any real measure of credibility.

Sawyerr observes that among the Mende people of Sierra Leone God is believed to be both far and near.¹⁶ God is responsible for the "health and well-being of His Creatures".¹⁷ Ngewo governs the universe, dispenses justice by punishing evil-doers and rewards the innocent.¹⁸ Nothing happens without "the express permission of Ngewo."¹⁹ In his study of the Akan, Yoruba and Mende notions of God, Sawyerr concludes that God "is not a philosophical concept Nor is He just a distant entity who left the earth and is permanently away from human reach . . . He is a Person, omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent; King, Judge, and Father of all men."²⁰

Thus Little's theory of a 'retired God' is inapplicable to Mende notions of God.

15 Ibid.

16 Harry Sawyerr, ANCESTOR OR CREATOR? p.67.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.; Cf. W. T. Harris and Harry Sawyerr, THE SPRINGS OF MENDE BELIEF AND CONDUCT: A DISCUSSION OF THE INFLUENCE OF THE BELIEF IN THE SUPERNATURAL AMONG THE MENDE, p.11.

20 Ibid., p.105.

In his article "Reflections upon the African Idea of God",

P. E. S. Thompson declares:

African concept of God tends toward the deistic. God has made the world and set it in motion but for practical purposes his existence is irrelevant to it; he is outside of it and only intervenes on very special occasions and then not at his own instance but because man invokes his aid as the maintainer of the order which he had established. 21

A close examination of certain points raised in Thompson's essay may reveal some of the weaknesses of his claim in the above quotation. He felt his essay must commence with an apology which he states as follows:

There is no such thing as an or the African Idea of God; there are very many different conceptions of God in Africa as there are different African tribes and nations. And to speak of the African idea of God is to obscure the rich variety of conceptions that exist. 22

Therefore, Thompson declares his objective for writing the essay as an attempt "to draw attention to certain characteristic patterns that appear in all African conceptions of God" ²³

If Thompson is certainly convinced that "there is no such thing as an or the African Idea of God", ²⁴ then his essay which has the title "Reflections Upon the African Idea of God" is at best a speculative exercise based on an imaginary subject. While it is valid to say that the phrase, "the African Idea of God" may obscure

21 P. E. S. Thompson, "Reflections Upon the African Idea of God," THE SIERRA LEONE BULLETIN OF RELIGION, p.59.

22 Ibid., p.56.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

the richness of existing diversities of African notions of God, the expression "an African idea of God" does not carry the same implication. To speak of "an African idea of God" leaves room for other African notions of God. After all, it is difficult, if not impossible, to find two persons with identical ideas about God.

Having rightly asserted that there is a rich diversity of notions of God in Africa, Thompson draws attention "to certain characteristic patterns that appear in all African conceptions of God."²⁵ The first in his list of distinctive marks of African traditional religions and the one which is of immediate concern at this point is the "belief in a Supreme God."²⁶ The characteristics of the Supreme God are in general "quite clearly defined"²⁷ but his relationship with people is uncertain.²⁸ He is unapproachable except in adverse situations when any individual can approach him directly for help.²⁹ Thompson continues:

In this respect he is more directly involved in the life of the people, the unseen beholder of all that happens and the maintainer of justice and righteousness within the tribe, without which it cannot survive. Thus the Mende of Sierra Leone say to a man who cannot get redress for a wrong done to him: "Nd Ngewo ma" i.e., "Leave it in God's hands". ³⁰

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

This quotation points out one of the reasons why Thompson's claim that the Supreme God's existence in African conception has no practical implication for the people he has created should not be accorded any significance. There is an apparent contradiction in saying that God has practically retired from the people he has created and at the same time affirming that this same God is believed to sustain his creatures.³¹ Even if one were to argue that God's work of sustenance was carried out once and for all, there is still an obvious ambiguity when the same God is believed to respond to his creatures' "occasional" cry for help.³²

In an essay in which Thompson set out to show "certain characteristic patterns that appear in all African conceptions of God",³³ he could only mention very briefly the Mende and the Creoles of Sierra Leone and in fact refer to the Yorubas in one sentence.³⁴ Such an excessive generalization casts doubt on the validity of his claims concerning "all African conceptions of God"³⁵ - a God who, as Thompson understands the African to say, has abandoned his creation.³⁶

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid., pp.56, 59.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

Thompson asserts that various African myths about God's separation from mankind substantiate his thesis that in "all African conceptions of God" there is a belief that God's existence is practically irrelevant to the people that he has created.³⁷ He selected a portion of a Mende story from Harris in order to show why God withdrew from mankind according to the Mende people of Sierra Leone. After the creation of the earth and other things, God made the first man and woman. He promised to give them anything that they might request from him. However, when the petitions were made so often, God decided to stay far away from them in order to avoid being tired out by their constant demands.³⁸

Not only did Thompson remove from its context the part of the story narrated above but he also left out the main portion of the account. Harris himself began the tale by giving the purpose of the story. It was an attempt to find a satisfactory explanation for the root of two Mende names of God, Ngewo and Leve.³⁹

A summary of the rest of the story is necessary before any further comment on Thompson's contention. According to Harris, the name Ngewo (God) was not known to the people at the beginning.⁴⁰ At first, they called him "Maanda-l ('he is grand-father')",⁴¹ then "Mangee, 'Grandfather take it'"⁴² - because whenever God gives

37 Ibid., p.59.

38 Ibid.

39 W. T. Harris, "The Idea of God among the Mende," AFRICAN IDEAS OF GOD: A SYMPOSIUM, pp.278f.

40 Ibid., p.278.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

them whatever they request from him, God says, "'Yes , take it.'"⁴³

But in order to avoid the importunate requisitions of the primal parents, God changed his living place overnight while his creatures were sleeping.⁴⁴ When they woke up the following morning, they saw him above them, "'spread out very big'."⁴⁵ Then they said, "Ngee-w~~o~~lo-nga-wa-le"⁴⁶ which is translated as "'Take-it-widespread-great-is'",⁴⁷ the appellation from which Mende people say "Ngewo wa, 'God great'."⁴⁸ From his new place of abode, God provided the people with a "'fowl'"⁴⁹ which they have to give back to him whenever they call upon him to settle their disputes.⁵⁰ On one occasion, Ngewo returned to bid them farewell and while on his 'Good-bye Mission', he strictly warned them to avoid having any evil thoughts against each other.⁵¹ Then, God left for his dwelling-place above. Since then, the Mende people call him "'Leve', 'up', 'high'."⁵²

Harris concludes his narrative as follows: "This story is not well known, and to the younger folk not at all, but it is valuable in that it attempts not only to explain the derivation of Ngewo and

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid., p.279.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.

Leve, but also the origin of the sacrifice of a fowl which is for all practical purposes essential in the Mende religious system."⁵³

What Harris says above does not provide any real evidence for one to conclude that God, for the African people, is far removed from the affairs of life. In actual fact, following the narrative, Harris shows certain areas of Mende people's awareness of God's involvement in their everyday living.⁵⁴ Since God is recognized as the One who brings all blessings, his name is invoked in wishing someone success in life.⁵⁵ For example, some of the translated versions of Mende everyday expressions are as follows:

'God make your forehead big,' i.e. bless you
'God give you a clean face,' i.e. good fortune
'God give you long life'
'God give you many children'. 56

There are common sayings for those going on a journey. For example, "'God take care of you' 'May God walk you well'."⁵⁷ In times of deliverance from assaults, protection against evil forces, when a mother gives birth to a child, one often hears the Mende say: "'O God, thank you'."⁵⁸ The prayers of a warrior include: "'O God, make my enemy fail to get me,' 'O God, let me tread on my enemy's grave'."⁵⁹

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid., p.280.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid.

There is also an awareness of God's ultimate will in matters of life and death. Among the Mende, nothing, either good or bad, ever takes place without God's permission - "'Only that which God shows will remain,' 'nothing happens but with God's consent' 'If God says I shall perish, I shall perish'." ⁶⁰

In times of dispute, God's name is on the lips of the people. "'God is Judge'" ⁶¹ is a common expression indicating the finality and inevitability of God's faultless verdict. ⁶²

A typical answer to the question 'How are you?' ⁶³ is "'No fault on the Chief'," ⁶⁴ which to the Mende means "Well, there is nothing to blame God for." ⁶⁵

Thus, Harris demonstrates that Mende people are aware of God's active presence in the world that he has made. Therefore, an idea of God who has abandoned them for all practical purposes except for 'occasional rescue visits' would be a strange doctrine. God's throne of majesty may be located 'on High' but Mende people are equally aware of his immanence. In his own study of the Mende people, Harry Sawyerr concludes that God's immanence is taken for granted by the people. ⁶⁶ He is approachable and anyone can call upon him whenever there is the need to do so. ⁶⁷ Ngewo, God, "as the Universal

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid.

66 H. Sawyerr, GOD: ANCESTOR OR CREATOR?: ASPECTS OF TRADITIONAL BELIEF IN GHANA, NIGERIA AND SIERRA LEONE, p.90.

67 Ibid.

Father is naturally held responsible for the health and well-being of his creatures."⁶⁸ God is the guardian of all actions, both good and bad, and at the same time he is the preserver of the life of his Children.⁶⁹

The foregoing evidence from Harris and Sawyerr does not lend support to Thompson's thesis.

O'Connell is another writer whose understanding of the idea of God's farness in African traditional religions needs to be examined. O'Connell submits that the Supreme God in West African religions is "a deus otiosus."⁷⁰ He puts forward two reasons or explanations for his notion of an 'unemployed God'. First, people were uneasy about an All-Powerful God whose nature and plans remain incomprehensible and unpredictable.⁷¹ A 'full-time presence' of such an "Almighty Power" was considered too dangerous.⁷² Therefore, in the words of O'Connell, "it was better that the high god should retire from active part in creation, except at those desperate moments when human order and security were in any case collapsing and when his intervention could be risked since he alone was powerful enough to restore the situation."⁷³

68 Ibid., p.67.

69 Ibid.

70 James O'Connell, "The Withdrawal of the High God in West African Religion: An Essay in Interpretation," MAN, 62 (1962), p.67.

71 Ibid., p.68.

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid.

O'Connell admits that the above explanation is an "intellectualist way of explaining"⁷⁴ the uneasiness of the people about the "high God"'s⁷⁵ constant mediation in their daily transactions.⁷⁶ Consequently, he advances a supplementary reason based on what he calls "the withdrawal myths"⁷⁷ which speak of God's retirement from the world as a consequence of mankind's obnoxious actions.⁷⁸ O'Connell does not cite any example of the myths but he proceeds to give his second reason for 'God's withdrawal'. The 'retirement', he says, is a result of people's discomfort about God's "all-purity".⁷⁹ The sharp contrast between God's purity and the impure actions of mankind accounts for God's separation.⁸⁰ In that respect, O'Connell writes: "They were aware with uneasy anguish that they strayed from his stringent code of justice. It was easier to own up to having made him angry once for all than to have him constantly preoccupied with human shortcomings."⁸¹

The two explanations above rest on O'Connell's assumption that God in West African religions has practically retired from active involvement in the daily business of mankind.⁸² This postulate,

74 Ibid.

75 Ibid.

76 Ibid.

77 Ibid.

78 Ibid.

79 Ibid.

80 Ibid.

81 Ibid.

82 Ibid., p.67.

however, remains undeveloped throughout O'Connell's essay. In an article which begins with such a bold assertion, one would expect the author to show the validity of his supposition. On the contrary, O'Connell could only made a very few blanket statements about some attributes of God in West African religions. Throughout the essay, the only West African people mentioned is the Mende of Sierra Leone.⁸³ But even then, the reference to them appears as a quotation from Little's comment on the Mende ideas of God.⁸⁴ However, Little's representation of the Mende notions of God's association with mankind has already been shown to be erroneous.⁸⁵ Therefore, O'Connell's thesis loses credibility since it rests on an unattested premise.

If it has not been established that in West African traditional religions there is a belief in a 'withdrawn God', then O'Connell's two explanations above should not be taken too seriously. As earlier indicated in this study,⁸⁶ ideas of God in African traditional religions include the belief that God is the Creator, Sustainer and Supreme Judge of the world that he has brought into existence.⁸⁷ These attributes lend support to the fact that God does not retire from the affairs of his creatures. The whole idea of speaking of

83 Ibid.

84 Ibid.

85 Supra, pp.111-112.

86 Supra, pp.89-108.

87 Ibid.

God as one who goes on 'retirement' either voluntarily or compulsorily is at best an overstated anthropomorphic expression which cannot be true of any real notions of God.

It is now time to consider more positively the idea of God's farness and nearness in African traditional religions.

2. More balanced views

To speak of the "farness of God" in African traditional religions is not simply a reference to the idea that God lives 'far away' from mankind in spatial terms.¹ The phrase, "farness of God", is in the context of this study a reference to God's transcendence.² This implies that God is unique, incomprehensible and incomparable with any other being. His power, wisdom and Majesty defy any adequate description.³ Also, in this study, the expression the "nearness of God" refers to his immanence.⁴ He is present everywhere and can be called upon any time and anywhere.⁵

Busia states that while there are different notions of God in Africa, one could speak of two ideas of God which are widely held throughout the continent.⁶ These are the notions of God's nearness and farness,⁷ God is an "immanent Presence; He is everywhere. Yet this image of pervading Presence is held alongside another which conceives God to be far away, beyond the reach of man, beyond the reach of human mind."⁸ No one can fully understand the "nature and dimensions"⁹ of the Almighty God.¹⁰

1 Cf. John S. Mbiti, CONCEPTS OF GOD IN AFRICA, pp.12ff.;
E. Bolaji Idowu, AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION: A DEFINITION, pp.155ff.

2 Cf. Ibid.

3 Cf. Ibid.

4 Cf. Ibid.

5 Cf. Ibid.

6 K. A. Busia, AFRICA IN SEARCH OF DEMOCRACY, pp.5f.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

Among the Ashanti of Ghana, God's nearness is partly acknowledged in the fact that God is regarded as the only One whom people can always rely upon in everyday life.¹¹ One of his titles is "Tweadumpon, the Dependable One."¹² God is also thought of as One who lives far away.¹³ In his farness, people have access to him through "intermediary deities"¹⁴ who derive their power and authority from him.¹⁵

The belief in God's farness and nearness is found among the Nupe people of Nigeria.¹⁶ God lives "'far away'",¹⁷ yet he is always present in every place.¹⁸ As transcendent, God cannot be approached directly.¹⁹ Any contact with him is to be channelled through an intermediary called "Kuti",²⁰ "'thing-in-between'",²¹ whose precise nature remains uncertain.²²

11 K. A. Busia, "The Ashanti," AFRICAN WORLDS: STUDIES IN THE COSMOLOGICAL IDEAS AND SOCIAL VALUES OF AFRICAN PEOPLES, p.192.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid., pp.192f.; Cf. R. S. Rattray, ASHANTI, pp.141f.

14 Ibid.; Cf. Rattray, ASHANTI, pp.142-144.

15 Ibid.

16 S. F. Nadel, NUPE RELIGION, p.11.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., p.13.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid., pp.13ff.

On the other hand, Nupes believe that God is not confined to his 'far-away-home' in the sky but he is also present everywhere at all times.²³ In one of their songs, this idea of God's nearness is expressed as follows:

"God is in front,

He is in the back." 24

God's control of the world and his intervention in the affairs of his creatures is not doubted by the Nupe people.²⁵ As Nadel observes, their everyday speech is full of expressions like "'with God's help', 'may God give this or that', 'may God cause such-and-such to happen'."²⁶ In order to lend weight to a statement, the phrase "'by God'"²⁷ is added as a seal that one is speaking the truth.²⁸

In Iboland, God is believed to be transcendent and at the same time immanent.²⁹ Chukwu (God) is "far away"³⁰ and can only be reached through minor spirits who are created by him to act as intermediaries.³¹ However, it is equally believed that God is always

23 Ibid., pp.10-13.

24 Ibid., p.11.

25 Ibid., p.13.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 Francis A. Arinze, SACRIFICE IN IBO RELIGION, pp.10f.;
Cf. Edmund C. O. Ilogu, CHRISTIAN ETHICS IN AN
AFRICAN BACKGROUND: A STUDY OF THE INTERACTION
OF CHRISTIANITY AND IBO CULTURE, pp.39f.

30 Ibid., pp.12f.

31 Ibid.

present.³² Nothing else can function, "not even the strongest 'alusi' (Spirit) can do anything"³³ except by the power of God, the enabling life behind all creatures.³⁴

As an indication of the people's awareness of God's immanence, morning prayers are mainly addressed to God directly.³⁵ In the case of prayers that are offered through the Spirits and Ancestors, God's name is first mentioned.³⁶

Metuh points out that the Ibo daily life is "full of the sense of divine presence and need of God's care and protection."³⁷ An Ika Ibo who gets up safely in the morning looks up to heaven and says: "God, I thank you for long life."³⁸ When an Ibo person greets his neighbour in the morning and finds out that the family is well, the first usual remark is "'Obu Chukwu" (It is God, or thanks be to God)".³⁹ For good fortune in material possessions or the birth of a baby, a typical translated expression is "God has done wonders."⁴⁰ When one faces a threat to life and property, a common phrase is "'Chukwu ekewena" (God wouldn't agree)".⁴¹

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid., p.11.

34 Ibid., pp.10-13.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

37 Emefie E. Metuh, "The Supreme God in Igbo Life and Worship," JOURNAL OF RELIGION IN AFRICA, 5 (1973), p.2.

38 P. A. Talbot, THE PEOPLES OF SOUTHERN NIGERIA, p.40.

39 Metuh, op. cit., p.3.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

Among the Yoruba, there is also an acknowledgement of God's transcendence as well as his nearness.⁴² God is above all Creation, occupying a most unique status which is not shared by any other being.⁴³ His throne is located 'far away' in heaven but he is present everywhere.⁴⁴ Olódùmarè, the Supreme God, is not restricted to one particular locality.⁴⁵

He is conceived as the Supreme Guardian of all homes and the Protector of those that go to sleep.⁴⁶ Thus, at night when people are ready to sleep, it is usually in the Name of God that they are expected to wake up safe and sound in the morning.⁴⁷ One of the common 'bed-time' prayers is "Olorun ji wa o,"⁴⁸ that is, "May the Supreme God wake us up."⁴⁹ When one is greeted in the morning "Have you risen well?"⁵⁰ the most regular answer takes the form "I thank God""⁵¹ Furthermore, God is believed to be on the road with travellers.⁵² Therefore, in bidding anyone going on a journey farewell, Olódùmarè is requested to guarantee his safety.⁵³

42 E. Bolaji Idowu, OLÓDÙMARÈ: GOD IN YORUBA BELIEF, pp.140ff.;
Cf J. Omosade Awolalu, YORUBA BELIEFS AND SACRIFICIAL RITES, pp.16-18.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 Awolalu, op. cit., p.17.

47 Ibid.

48 Osadolor Imasogie, Class Lectures on "African Traditional Religion," 29th March, 1974.

49 Ibid.

50 Geoffrey Parrinder, WEST AFRICAN RELIGION: A STUDY OF THE BELIEFS AND PRACTICES OF AKAN, EWE, YORUBA, IBO, AND KINDRED PEOPLES, p.20.

51 Ibid.

52 Awolalu, loc. cit.

53 Ibid.

In their times of need Idowu maintains, Yorubas "spontaneously converse with the ever-present, ever-hearing Olódùmarè"⁵⁴ whose existence is not subject to the limitations of space and time.⁵⁵

In his study of Nuer ideas of God, Evans-Pritchard points out that "Nuer religious thought cannot be understood unless God's closeness to man is taken together with his separation from man, for its meaning lies precisely in this paradox."⁵⁶ God is "far away in the sky"⁵⁷ but he is also on earth.⁵⁸ He is "Spirit in the heavens,"⁵⁹ and there are no limitations on him as to where he could be found.⁶⁰ He is everywhere and he manifests himself in many ways.⁶¹ For example, he appears in the "sky, falls in the rain, shines in the Sun and Moon, and blows in the Wind."⁶² Although God is associated with the things he has created, he is not the same as them because he is above all creation.⁶³

54 Idowu, op. cit., p.142.

55 Ibid.

56 E. E. Evans-Pritchard, NUER RELIGION, p.4.; Cf. "God In Nuer Religion," (by the same author) in MAN'S RELIGIOUS QUEST, p.559.

57 Ibid., p.9.

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid., p.4.

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid., p.2.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid., pp.2-3.

In spite of the distance between heaven and earth, God maintains close association with mankind.⁶⁴ He is regarded as "Father"⁶⁵ of all mankind, offering protection and intimate friendship.⁶⁶ He is conceived as "'Kwoth me jale Kaji', 'God who walks with you. He is the friend of men who helps them in their troubles'"⁶⁷ In their everyday speech, especially in times of crisis, one hears Nuer people say: "'God is present',"⁶⁸ a recognition that the Ever-Present God is able to alleviate the particular problem.⁶⁹

That God is near in Nuer conception is further indicated in their informal and formal prayers as well as sacrifices which are offered to God for peace, protection and deliverance from the powers of evil.⁷⁰ Short prayers are frequently on their lips. For example: "'Ah, my God'"; "'Let us be at Peace'"; "'Let me journey well'";⁷¹ "'God, thou (who) knowest how to support [or care for] souls, support [or care for] our souls'."⁷²

64 Ibid., p.7.

65 Ibid., p.8.

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid., p.9.

69 Ibid.

70 Ibid., pp.9ff.; Cf. Evans-Pritchard, "God in Nuer Religion," MAN'S RELIGIOUS QUEST, pp.571ff.

71 Ibid., p.23.

72 Ibid., p.26.

For the Nuer, God is near and approachable. He is present to receive sacrifices for the life which he alone gives, sustains and takes away.⁷³ He is also transcendent, unique and unapproachable.⁷⁴

Booth provides another example concerning the belief in God's transcendence and immanence in African traditional religions.⁷⁵ According to him, the Baluba people of Kasongo Niembo (Zaire) believe that God is both far and near.⁷⁶ In one of the Baluba sayings, this paradox is expressed thus: "God is not far away - when you call to Him He answers, but if you run after Him you cannot catch up to Him for night will overtake you."⁷⁷

Some of the names of God such as "Kalemba Namaweji and Kungwa Banze"⁷⁸ convey the idea of God's intimacy and closeness to man.⁷⁹ God is "Wamanene"⁸⁰ which means "the Sorrowful or Suffering one."⁸¹

God is believed to be at work vis-a-vis the things he has created.⁸² He is the "Divine Power"⁸³ who manifests himself in or

73 Ibid., pp.197ff.

74 Ibid., p.10.

75 Newell S. Booth, "The View from Kasongo Niembo." AFRICAN RELIGIONS: A SYMPOSIUM, pp.60ff.

76 Ibid., p.62.

77 W. F. P. Burton, PROVERBS OF THE BALUBA, cited by Newell S. Booth on p.62 of his article indicated above (footnote 75).

78 Ibid.

79 Ibid.

80 Ibid., p.63.

81 Ibid.

82 Ibid.

83 Ibid.

through created beings, especially through the great forces of nature on the one hand and, on the other hand, through the great ancestral heroes of the past.⁸⁴ He is not everything that exists but he is present everywhere.⁸⁵

However, this same God who is "Father of Creation"⁸⁶ is far away from the very thing he has created.⁸⁷ In order to approach him, one has to go through the Ancestors.⁸⁸

Among Lugbara people, God is believed to have "two aspects, one transcendent and the other immanent."⁸⁹ He is God who is "in the sky"⁹⁰ and away from his creatures on earth.⁹¹ On the other hand, he is "God in the streams,"⁹² and one who maintains close contact with his creatures.⁹³ As an immanent being, he lives on earth, manifesting his Presence in the things that he has made.⁹⁴ He is conceived as "the Ultimate fountainhead of all power and all authority, of all sanctions for orderly relations between men."⁹⁵

84 Ibid.

85 Ibid.

86 Ibid.

87 Ibid.

88 Ibid., p.62.

89 John Middleton, LUGBARA RELIGION: RITUAL AND AUTHORITY AMONG AN EAST AFRICAN PEOPLE, p.252.

90 Ibid., p.27.

91 Ibid.

92 Ibid.

93 Ibid., pp.27, 253.

94 Ibid.

95 Ibid.

God is said to be the controller of all Creation.⁹⁶ Human beings and all "spirits"⁹⁷ are for ever subject to him.⁹⁸ Even Ancestors who are prominent in the day-to-day affairs of the people cannot function without the 'upholding hands' of God.⁹⁹ In both daily and periodical sacrifices or offerings, ultimate acceptance or rejection belongs to God alone.¹⁰⁰

But as One who is transcendent, God dwells in the sky and is less involved on earth.¹⁰¹

In the light of what has been said thus far on the idea of God's farness and nearness in African Traditional Religions, it is difficult to justify the claim that Africans conceive God as One who has abandoned his Creation. On the contrary, it has been shown that at least some of them, if not all, believe that God is both transcendent and immanent. This belief is summed up in the study on African Religions carried out by the Roman Catholic Church Secretariat for Non-Christians: "In reality the presence of God pervades traditional African life as the presence of a Being who is superior, personal and mysterious. One turns to him at the solemn hours of life, and at its most critical moments."¹⁰²

96 Ibid., p.91.

97 Ibid.

98 Ibid.

99 Ibid., pp.25ff., 257.

100 Ibid., pp.79ff.

101 Ibid., p.269.

102 Secretariatus Pro Non-Christianis, MEETING THE AFRICAN RELIGIONS, p.44.

However, it is possible that the belief in intermediary divinities and the role assigned to them contribute to the difficulty in arriving at an objective assessment of traditional African peoples' awareness of God's nearness. It is therefore necessary to examine, at least briefly, the belief in go-between divinities among some African peoples.

3. Divinities as mediators between God and man

Among some African peoples, it is believed that certain spiritual beings exist as God's Ministers, serving as intermediaries between God and man.¹ These beings are countless non-human spirits believed to be manifestations of God and more often personified as or associated with natural phenomena.² They include also spirits of departed members of family or clan, and spirits of deified national heroes.³ These spiritual beings are referred to in this study as intermediary divinities.⁴

What now follows is a brief examination of how some African peoples view the relation of intermediary divinities to God and man.

In Yorubaland, it is believed that divinities are "beings of a higher order than man"⁵ who are brought into being by God in order to serve his will.⁶ In the words of Idowu, "they are the Ministers

1 Cf. John S. Mbiti, AFRICAN RELIGIONS AND PHILOSOPHY, pp.68-92; Mbiti, CONCEPTS OF GOD IN AFRICA, pp.220-234; E. Bolaji Idowu, AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION: A DEFINITION, pp.169ff.

2 Cf. Ibid.

3 Cf. Ibid.; Osadolor Imasogie, Class Lectures on "African Traditional Religion", 1973/74.

4 There are other intermediaries such as priests, diviners, Kings, Chiefs, medicine-men, rain-makers, etc. These are not treated here because they are not on the same level of prominence as intermediary spirits.

5 E. Bolaji Idowu, OLÓDUMARÈ: GOD IN YORUBA BELIEF, p.57.

6 Ibid. Cf. J. O. Awolalu, YORUBA BELIEFS AND SACRIFICIAL RITES, p.50.

of Olódùmarè, looking after the affairs of His Universe and acting as intermediaries between Him and the world of men."⁷ Each of the divinities is allotted a section of nature to govern and be responsible for to Olódùmarè.⁸ They have power to bless or punish anyone within their area of jurisdiction.⁹ However, Olódùmarè retains the right to exercise his veto power over their influence and authority.¹⁰

The Yoruba have numerous shrines where they offer prayers and sacrifices to these divinities, who they believe have the mandate to receive the offerings on behalf of Olódùmarè.¹¹ The divinities do take what is theirs in the offerings and pass on to God what he is to get or enact.¹² Ultimately, God alone decides the type of response to people's prayers and sacrifices.¹³

Although the Yoruba approach God directly as occasion demands, the intermediary role of numerous divinities is never doubted.¹⁴

7 Ibid., p.62.

8 Ibid., Cf. Same Author, AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION: A DEFINITION, p.170.

9 Ibid., Cf. Harry Sawyerr, GOD: ANCESTOR OR CREATOR? ASPECTS OF TRADITIONAL BELIEF IN GHANA, NIGERIA AND SIERRA LEONE, pp.42ff.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid., Cf. Awolalu, op. cit., pp.91f.

12 Ibid., p.142.

13 Ibid., Cf. Michael R. Welton, "Themes in African Traditional Belief and Ritual," PRACTICAL ANTHROPOLOGY, vol.18, No.1, (Jan-Feb. 1971), p.6.

14 Ibid.

They believe that in general man should approach God through his servants - the intermediary divinities - in recognition of his Supreme Status.¹⁵ However, it is worth noting that this bureaucratic approach to God has at least one grave limitation, namely the difficulty always to maintain the balance between giving to God all the honour and glory that he deserves and appreciating the role of his 'Ministers'.¹⁶ Idowu points out that the divinities are often accorded such prominence in the lives of many Yoruba people in their traditional religion that a whole-hearted devotion to Olódùmarè is either weak or absent.¹⁷ The Yoruba, like many other African traditional religionists, often exchange the "means" for the "End", in this case, God's messengers in place of God himself,¹⁸ This tragic failure constitutes a perversion of both religion and human life in African traditional religions.¹⁹

The Ibos acknowledge the existence of numerous spirits who are created by God and are engaged by him as servants in the running of his world.²⁰ As God's "Subordinates"²¹ the spirits are the normal

15 Ibid., pp.141-142.

16 Ibid., p.143.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid., Cf. Same Author, AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGIONS: A DEFINITION, p.173.

19 Ibid.

20 G. T. Basden, AMONG THE IBOS OF NIGERIA: AN ACCOUNT OF THE CURIOUS & INTERESTING HABITS, CUSTOMS & BELIEFS OF A LITTLE KNOWN AFRICAN PEOPLE BY ONE WHO HAS FOR MANY YEARS LIVED AMONGST THEM ON CLOSE & INTIMATE TERMS, p.215; Francis A. Arinze, SACRIFICE IN IBO RELIGION, pp.12f., 49, 112.

21 Edmund C. O. Ilogu, CHRISTIAN ETHICS IN AN AFRICAN BACKGROUND: A STUDY OF THE INTERACTION OF CHRISTIANITY AND IBO CULTURE, p.40.

channels through which man can approach God.²² These intermediary spirits are "charged with specific functions for man and society."²³ They mediate for man before God and are offered prayers and sacrifices for protection and provision of human needs.²⁴ The Ibos believe that these spirits discharge their duties on behalf of God.²⁵ The offerings that these spirits receive ultimately belong to God and final approval or rejection is God's choice alone.²⁶

But equally, Ibos believe that these go-between spirits have authority to act as if they are independent of the Supreme Being.²⁷ In the words of Ezeanya: "They have their resources and have full powers to act without consulting God or asking for his permission."²⁸ For man to be always in cordial relation with them carries the advantage of averting their anger and obtaining their help.²⁹

At the same time, the Iboman knows that these messengers of God are not always successful in discharging their responsibilities toward man.³⁰ They fail and disappoint man from time to time.³¹

22 Ibid.

23 Stephen N. Ezeanya, "God, Spirits and the Spirit World: With Special Reference to the Igbo-speaking People of Southern Nigeria," BIBLICAL REVELATION AND AFRICAN BELIEFS, p.41.

24 Arinze, op. cit., pp.49ff.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid., Cf. Ezeanya, op. cit., pp.37f.

27 Ezeanya, op. cit., p.42.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.; Cf. Arinze, op. cit., p.13.

31 Ibid.

For the Ibos, God alone could deliver man where and when these spiritual agents exhibit their incompetence.³²

Despite the recognition of the limitation of these intermediary spirits, Ibo traditional religionists admit that their presence and authority are vital to the ongoing of man's everyday life.³³

Alongside the belief that everyone can approach God directly, the Ashanti of Ghana maintain that God rules the world through "intermediary deities."³⁴ These spiritual beings "derive their power from the Supreme Being. They come from him and are parts of him."³⁵ For the Ashanti, Busia declares: "A god is but the mouth-piece of the Supreme Being (Onyankopou Kyeame), a servant acting as intermediary between Creator and Creature."³⁶ According to R. S. Rattray, they are God's "lieutenants"³⁷ through whom God expresses his concern for man.³⁸

Ashanti people pray to these intermediary deities for the provision of their needs.³⁹ They ask them to provide security

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid., p.43; Cf. Arinze, op. cit., pp.111f.

34 K. A. Busia, "The Ashanti," AFRICAN WORLDS: STUDIES IN THE COSMOLOGICAL IDEAS AND SOCIAL VALUES OF THE AFRICAN PEOPLES, pp.192-193.

35 Ibid., p.193; Cf. Madeline Manoukian, AKAN AND GA-ADANGME PEOPLES OF THE GOLD COAST, p.55.

36 Ibid.

37 R. S. Rattray, ASHANTI, p.141.

38 Ibid.

39 Busia, op. cit., p.194.

against the attacks of witches and evil spirits.⁴⁰ They beseech them for well-being, success in business, good fortune and offspring.⁴¹

Among these spiritual beings, the Ashanti place much emphasis on the Ancestors whom they consider to be man's close ally in the struggle to survive and to live.⁴² Ancestral spirits are believed to show a lot of interest in the affairs of their relatives on earth and to exercise great authority over them.⁴³ By virtue of their full membership in the spirit world, they have power to bless and to inflict punishment on those relatives whose existence is at present confined to the terrestrial plane.⁴⁴ The Ashanti accept the need constantly to honour and fear these spiritual beings.⁴⁵

Ancestral spirits are regarded as intermediaries between God and man among the Mende of Sierra Leone.⁴⁶ Just as Mende Chiefs are usually approached through their servants, spokesmen or the most senior wife, God is often reached through Ancestral spirits.⁴⁷ In general, Ancestors are believed to convey the prayers of the

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid., pp.201f.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 W. T. Harris, "The Idea of God among the Mende," AFRICAN IDEAS OF GOD: A SYMPOSIUM, pp.281f.

47 W. T. Harris and Harry Sawyerr, THE SPRINGS OF MENDE BELIEF AND CONDUCT: A DISCUSSION OF THE INFLUENCE OF THE BELIEF IN THE SUPERNATURAL AMONG THE MENDE, pp.15ff.

people to God.⁴⁸ They are able to perform this go-between function "because they are spirit and therefore have ready access to ngewe who is also spirit."⁴⁹

On the other hand there is a difference of opinion among the Mende people about the precise role of Ancestors as intermediaries.⁵⁰ Some affirm that "up to a point",⁵¹ Ancestors provide answers to prayers on their own volition.⁵² For others, Ancestors do reply to petitions if God grants permission. Such people add the comment: "'The Ancestors are nearer to ngewe than we are; they live under His government and know how much ngewe desires us to have.'"⁵³ Yet, there are other people among the Mende who hold the view that prayers have to pass through not just one Ancestor as a Mediator but a series of Ancestors before reaching God finally.⁵⁴

These different views notwithstanding, Ancestral spirits continue to occupy a dominant place in Mende life.⁵⁵ Their aid is sought through numerous rituals, many of which are connected with protection of the people's lives, provision of rain, good crops and removal of ill-fortune, sickness or calamity.⁵⁶

48 Ibid.; Cf. Harris, op. cit., p.282.

49 Ibid., p.15.

50 Ibid., p.16.; Cf. Harris, loc. cit.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid., pp.17ff.

56 Ibid., pp.17-33.

Furthermore, the Mende maintain the view that Ancestral spirits as intermediaries ought not to be ignored.⁵⁷ These spirits deserve honour and respect, food and drink, in order to remain pleased with their offspring and also carry out their mediatory function to the best interest of their Children on earth.⁵⁸

The foregoing is not a suggestion that God is forgotten in Mende life, nor is it to be understood that the Mende think of God as One who is absent from the affairs of his creatures.⁵⁹ After all, Ancestral spirits as intermediaries between God and man indirectly promote the people's awareness of God. To a certain degree, these go-between spirits remind people of God's presence as they discharge their mediatory duties.⁶⁰ Also, the Mende do not hesitate to address God directly especially in short and spontaneous prayers when the need for immediate action or response overrides the more usual bureaucratic approach.⁶¹

But it remains to be said that neither the occasional spontaneous call upon God without an intermediary, nor the use of God's name in blessings, curses and swearing⁶² can hide the fact that the cult of intermediaries contributes to the difficulty in ascertaining God's nearness in African traditional religion.

57 Ibid., pp.16-17.

58 Ibid.

59 Cf. Harris, op. cit., pp.280f.

60 Cf. Harris and Sawyerr, op. cit., pp.15ff., 34f.

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid.; Cf. Harry Sawyerr, GOD: ANCESTOR OR CREATOR?: ASPECTS OF TRADITIONAL BELIEF IN GHANA, NIGERIA AND SIERRA LEONE, pp.67f.

One of the beliefs of Ewe⁶³ people is that God, "Mawu",⁶⁴ created several spirits known as "trowo" to act as intermediaries between him and mankind.⁶⁵ Prayers and sacrifices to God are directed through these spirits.⁶⁶ Even the sacrifices offered to "trowo"⁶⁷ are "ultimately transmitted"⁶⁸ to God.⁶⁹

As intermediaries, these spirits are also assigned the responsibility of protecting and watching over the inhabitants of the earth."⁷⁰ The Ewe people are persuaded to give full attention to these spirits, whom they acknowledge to have enormous power to strike an offender and bless the faithful.⁷¹ Consequently, they seek the help of these 'powerful' mediators "in sowing and harvesting, hunting and fishing, commerce and war."⁷² To some of the intermediary spirits, for example Dzingbe and Anyigba, are attributed the authority to provide rain, enable barren women to become fruitful, heal diseases, cause yams to grow, bring good fortune and grant success in undertakings.⁷³

63 A West African tribe found mainly in Togo, Ghana and Dahomey (now the Republic of Benin).

64 Madeline Manoukian, THE EWE-SPEAKING PEOPLE OF TOGOLAND AND THE GOLD COAST, p.45.

65 Ibid.; Cf. John S. Mbiti, CONCEPTS OF GOD IN AFRICA, p.232.

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid.

69 Ibid.

70 Ibid.

71 Ibid., pp.46-47.

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid.

The belief that these mediatory spirits have much to offer man may also account for one of the reasons why Ewe people devote much of their life honouring these intermediaries, as noted by Manoukian.⁷⁴

The idea of divinities acting as intermediaries between God and man is also found among the Ibibio. Ayankop points out that Ibibio traditional beliefs account for the existence of several divinities who are said to be God's ministers.⁷⁵ The spirits are engaged to serve only the will of God.⁷⁶

Messenger describes very vividly the intermediary role of the spirits according to the conception of Anang Ibibio as follows:

In the economic sphere, particular ones promote the safe clearing of the bush, the successful growth of various crops and palm trees, the ability of craftsmen to produce articles that will command good prices in the market, and the prosperity of traders. In the political realm, certain others protect the members of each of the iman [group of villages], aid the villages' waging of war, and insure successful reigns for chiefs and community and patrilineage leaders. Some fulfil social functions by fostering reproduction, health and longevity, by protecting the members of the families and each of the secret societies, and by helping people to earn honorary titles. The greater number, however, are assigned religious tasks: to serve each of the types of religious practitioners by maintaining

74 Ibid.

75 Etim Ayankop, "Main Features of Ibibio Traditional Belief in God," an unpublished B.A. (Hons.) extended essay, University of Ibadan, May/June 1973, p.12.

76 Ibid., p.13.

contact between them and deity, to install souls and fates upon conception, and to observe the behavior of each human being and report it to Abassi [God] for subsequent reward or punishment. 77

This lengthy quotation, among other things, shows the comprehensive nature of the role which mediating spirits are thought to play. They are believed to have jurisdiction over all areas of human life and their aid is sought in virtually all undertakings. Ibibios are fully aware that man is incapable of facing the challenges and opportunities of this life alone without support from God and his divine messengers.⁷⁸

These go-between spirits receive regular sacrifices and prayers on behalf of Abassi.⁷⁹ When the spirits present to God whatever they receive from the people, it is believed that God "sends power (odudu) to achieve the desired ends"⁸⁰ according to the meritorious status of the petitioner.⁸¹

Surely, in a religious tradition where there is a belief in One Supreme God alongside numerous intermediary divinities, the danger of a divided loyalty is real.

77 John C. Messenger, "Religious Acculturation among the Anang Ibibio," CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN AFRICAN CULTURES, pp.280-281.

78 Ibid.

79 Ibid., p.280.

80 Ibid.

81 Ibid.

C. THE WORSHIP OF GOD

A detailed study of all aspects of the worship of God in African traditional religions is certainly a valuable contribution to knowledge. However, this present essay intends to outline only those characteristics of the worship which are at present considered helpful to the development of a relevant doctrine of the Church. Thus, this study pays particular attention to some of the acts of worship in African traditional religions.

Furthermore, the term "worship" is used here in a broad sense to cover man's acts of conscious response to God, the Ultimate Reality behind all existence.¹ In the words of Mbiti: "These acts may be formal or informal, regular or extempore, communal or individual, ritual or unceremonial, through word or deed."²

With the above preliminary statement, two main acts of worship in African traditional religions are now considered.

1 Cf. John S. Mbiti, CONCEPTS OF GOD IN AFRICA, p.179; Omosade Awolalu, YORUBA BELIEFS AND SACRIFICIAL RITES, pp.97-99.

2 Ibid.

1. PRAYER

Prayer is regarded as a central act of worship in African traditional religions.³ Corporately and individually (though less emphasized), African traditional religionists speak to God about their needs.⁴ They praise him for his majesty, pre-eminence and mercy. Also apparent in their prayers is thanksgiving for the gifts of life which, usually include children, health, cattle, sheep, goats, sunshine, rain and abundant harvest.⁵ Confessions for breaking any of the rules of God, although rare, appear in their prayers and are usually accompanied by appropriate sacrifices for the removal of God's punishment.⁶

At times, prayers are addressed to God directly, and on many other instances some African traditional religionists pray to him through intermediaries such as Ancestors and other ministering spirits.⁷

Illustrations on the above view of traditional African prayer, with particular attention to the occasion or purpose of the prayers, are now drawn from some of the tribes.

3 Cf. Aylward Shorter, "Prayer in African Tradition," AFRICAN ECCLESIASTICAL REVIEW, 14 (1972), pp.11f; Mbiti, AFRICAN RELIGIONS AND PHILOSOPHY, pp.61f.

4 Ibid., pp.11-17.

5 Cf. Francis-Xavier Sserufusa Kyewalyanga, TRADITIONAL RELIGION, CUSTOM, AND CHRISTIANITY IN UGANDA: AS ILLUSTRATED BY THE GANDA WITH SOME REFERENCE TO OTHER AFRICAN CULTURES AND ISLAM, pp.254-270.

6 Ibid.

7 Cf. Shorter, op. cit., p.12.; Mbiti, AFRICAN RELIGIONS AND PHILOSOPHY, pp.61ff.

The celebration of the rites of birth, marriage and death among the Nupe people of Nigeria involves praying to God for health, protection and prosperity.⁸ At a naming ceremony on the eighth day after the birth of a child, the prayer of a Nupe father is given as follows: "'I am praying to Sokó. The child that has entered, Lord God, it is Landu returned (the grandfather's name). Kuci, hold him (the child) securely, do not permit that he falls sick. May he live, cause him to grow old.'"⁹

A bride's father, on a marriage occasion, calls upon Sokó "for a prosperous marriage, blessed with children."¹⁰ For a marriage to be successful, the blessing of Soko is needed.¹¹

In another example, the head of a family prays to God towards the closing of a funeral ceremony as follows: "'We make mourning for so-and-so who died. God cause all people to have health. We offer you water (i.e. beer) because of the death. God, grant health to everyone; may no one die from now on.'"¹²

Nupe prayers are not restricted to the above crises of life alone. They pray for other matters, particularly the welfare of their community.¹³ Nadel translates some of the prayers at a

8 S. F. Nadel, NUPE RELIGION, pp.115ff.

9 Ibid., p.116. The term Kuci which appears in the quotation is defined by Nadel as "'Personal Soul'" (p.23).

10 Ibid., p.119.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid., p.127.

13 Ibid., p.76.

sacrificial meal as follows:

'May the whole town have health; may it have to eat, may it have to drink, may the whole town have health.'

'Tsoci (our Lord), what we are giving this year, (what) we are doing thus: God may give health (for that reason); the doing of new (things), may it come (to prosper) also next year, also (in) a thousand years.' 14

After pouring some beer on the ground during a sacrifice, an appointed leader of the group kneels down and raises his voice to God on behalf of the people:

'Lord God, take this. The Etsu Dazi (Chief) ordered us to make gunnu / a type of Nupe ritual 7. Gunnu, may the town have health. The food of the soil, may it thrive greatly. The women, God give them children. May the town have health. Rain may fall, yam may thrive, corn may thrive. God may cause that everything may prosper.' 15

These Nupe prayers, like other examples that will be taken from other tribes, point out, among other things, the people's sense of dependence upon God, the Creator-Sustainer Being upon whom all lives owe their existence and survival.¹⁶

Privately and publicly, the Yoruba pray to God.¹⁷ Sometimes, they address him directly, often spontaneously.¹⁸ But most of the time, prayers are offered to intermediary divinities who are believed to be created by God to serve in his 'theocratic government.'¹⁹

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid., p.81.

16 Cf. K. A. Busia, AFRICA IN SEARCH OF DEMOCRACY, p.10.

17 E. Bolaji Idowu, OLÓDUMARÈ: GOD IN YORUBA BELIEF, p.116.; Cf. J. Omosade Awolalu, YORUBA BELIEFS AND SACRIFICIAL RITES, pp.102f.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., pp.62, 116.

While such divinities play a prominent role in hearing and answering prayer requests, ultimate approval remains the right of the Supreme Deity alone.²⁰

Furthermore, Yoruba prayers are largely petitionary in character.²¹ Their requests generally include "protection from sicknesses and death, gifts of longevity, children, prosperity in enterprises, victory over enemies, protection from evil spirits and of relatives near and distant, rectification of unhappy destinies, and abundant provision of material things; blessing on all well-wishers and damnation on all ill-wishers."²²

On the other hand, it is observed that the contents of Yoruba prayers are not entirely devoted to petitions alone.²³ Praise and thanksgiving find their places in prayer especially on such occasions as birth of a child, recovery from illness, deliverance from evil, escaping unhurt from an accident, success in an enterprise and seeing the light of another day in good health.²⁴

At times, prayer and greeting are not separated.²⁵ For example, when a King is greeted by his subjects(s), the salutation is usually in the form of a prayer.²⁶ One such prayer is recorded and translated

20 Ibid., pp.116f.; Cf. Awolalu, p.103.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Cf. Awolalu, op, cit., pp.102ff.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid., pp.103f.

26 Ibid.

by Awolalu as follows:

Hail, your majesty!
 May (your) sacrifice be auspicious,
 May you live till old age, Ọ lója.
 May your time be prosperous.
 May there be good leaders in your time;
 May the barren have issue in your time;
 May the town be peaceful,
 May the town have elders,
 May there be no rebellion,
 May you live to see and celebrate
 another festival. 27

The privilege to greet whoever is the Chief is simultaneously an occasion for prayer for the Chief's well-being and the welfare of all his subjects.²⁸

Prayer, for the Yoruba, is an essential part of everyday life.²⁹ As they get out of bed in the morning, begin the day's work at home, on the road to the farm, on the way to the stream, while at work or engaged in an enterprise, when going to bed at night, they seize the opportunity of God's omnipresence and speak to him about many aspects of the issues of life.³⁰

Arinze is correct when he stated that "God has an honoured place in Ibo prayer."³¹ God is not only called upon when all other alternatives have failed but he is invoked first in all prayers.³²

27 Ibid., pp.103-104.

28 Ibid.

29 Idowu, op. cit., p.117.

30 Ibid., also p.42.

31 Francis A. Arinze, SACRIFICE IN IBO RELIGION, p.11.

32 Ibid.

The morning prayers among the Ibos are mostly devoted to the Supreme Being.³³ When a father of an Ibo family gets up in the morning, he goes through ritual preparation for prayer. Then he offers the morning prayer which usually consists of greetings to God and intermediary deities, petition, curses and concluding remark(s).³⁴ An example from the work of Arinze is cited here at length, giving only the English version:

Greetings:	God, greetings. Ani, greetings; Igwe, greetings . . . Take Kola, all
Petition: (to God)	Forgive the mouth that speaks evil. Forgive the mouth that speaks good. Without offence, no forgiveness. We ask for life and old age, for a good day to-day, Eke-day. Give us food and drink. Give us children and rich harvests . . . May my son Okafo get a son, may he get money. May his children serve him, as he has served me
Curses:	Both those who speak good of me, and those who speak evil of me, As a person plans for others, so God plans for him. If anyone says that my son Okafo shall beget no child, Let his own son get none
Conclusion:	Let the kite perch, and let the eagle perch. Whichever says that the other must not perch, let its wings break off! 35

Apart from regular morning prayers, Ibo people frequently call upon God privately in the form of short ejaculatory prayers.³⁶

33 Ibid., p.24.

34 Ibid., p.25.

35 Ibid., pp.25-27.

36 Ibid., p.11.

Such petitions occur mostly when they are about to set out on a journey, when faced with sudden danger and when passing by a shrine.³⁷

Public prayer is in most cases connected with sacrifice.³⁸

In times of drought, famine and epidemic disease, sacrifices for restraining God's wrath are usually accompanied by community prayers.³⁹

In some parts of Iboland, a special day is dedicated to the worship of God alone each year.⁴⁰ On such a day, much attention is given to prayers and sacrifices.⁴¹ Shelton gives one example of an Ibo prayer during an Annual Festival Day set apart for the worship of God:

Eze Chitoke: biko zogide anyi.
 Eze Chitoke: please protect us.
 Ketebe umu, Ketebe ife, isi gi dibe.
 Bring forth 'children,' bring forth goods,
 to please you.
 Zogidenumu ndi ikenyelu.
 Protect the people the ones you have.
 Biko Zogide anyi.
 Please protect us.
 Ekwene ife Obuna Ka oma anyi.
 Do not let things unexpected not to
 happen (to) us. 42

37 Ibid., pp.11-24.

38 Ibid., p.23.

39 Ibid.

40 Austin J. Shelton, "The Presence of the 'Withdrawn' High God in North Ibo Religious Belief and Worship,"
MAN: A MONTHLY RECORD OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL SCIENCE,
 64 (1964), p.17.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

Here one sees a further example of a people's belief that life without God's protection and care is totally insecure and hopeless. Consequently, prayers are offered to ensure continuity of the family offspring.

Sometimes, preparation for marriage may include prayers for the bride and bridegroom.⁴³ An example of such a prayer by a Priest related to the bride is recorded and translated "almost literally" by Ezeanya as follows:

God, who created man, behold this fowl!
 God who created man, behold Ugwuaku (the prospective bride) my child; protect her for me. Offspring is the main thing in the world. God, who acts according to his designs, give her children. Preserve her husband-to-be. Give him the means of giving me wealth to eat. If she gives birth to a female child; it will live, if a male, it will live. May she not have difficulties in child-birth. May her health be good; may the health of her future husband be good. Prayer obtains both among the Spirits and among men. God, treat me well! I am asking for goodness. My son-in-law shall give me things and I shall eat. Love will exist between us. God, that is what I ask for. The land! Spirits of Ihe! God the Creator! I thank you. I have finished. 44

A close examination of the above prayer reveals what is characteristic of most of the prayers seen thus far, namely an acceptance of the fact of man's dependence upon God who alone ultimately holds the key to life.

43 Cf. Stephen N. Ezeanya, "God, Spirits and the Spirit World," BIBLICAL REVELATION AND AFRICAN BELIEFS, p.41.

44 Ibid.

In Sierra Leone, it is reported that Mende people pray to God directly and also indirectly through Ancestral Spirits who act as intermediaries between the people and God.⁴⁵ Direct prayers occur mainly when invoking a blessing or pronouncing a curse, in times of emergency or when life is in immediate danger.⁴⁶ In such instances, the prayers are concise and to the point.⁴⁷

When praying to God through Spirits of Ancestors, prayers are longer and preparation involves summoning the spirits in advance.⁴⁸ All prayers, in order to be complete, must end with a commitment that God's will be done.⁴⁹ In general, items for such prayers include requests for protection against evil forces, deliverance from snake bite, avoidance of drowning in the rivers, provision of abundant rain, blessing on rice farms and confession of known faults.⁵⁰

Among the Akan of Ghana, God's "blessing is sought in all crises of life."⁵¹ As One who controls the destiny of every man, Akan people call upon him.⁵² For example, when a young woman is pregnant for the

45 W. T. Harris, "The Idea of God among the Mende," AFRICAN IDEAS OF GOD: A SYMPOSIUM, pp.281f.; Cf. W. T. Harris & Harry Sawyerr, THE SPRINGS OF MENDE BELIEF AND CONDUCT: A DISCUSSION OF THE INFLUENCE OF THE BELIEF IN THE SUPERNATURAL AMONG THE MENDE, pp.5ff.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.; Cf. Harris & Sawyerr, op. cit., p.12.

48 Ibid., p.282.

49 Ibid.; Cf. Harris & Sawyerr, op. cit., pp.9-10.

50 Ibid., pp.291-295.

51 H. St. John T. Evans, "Akan Doctrine of God," AFRICAN IDEAS OF GOD: A SYMPOSIUM, p.251.

52 Ibid.

first time, the rite includes a prayer to Nyame or Nyankopon (God) for the child to be delivered without much trouble or pain.⁵³ The prayer of a husband during such a rite is given as follows:

"O Tweadumpon Nyame, O Bosommuru, O my Obosom, O my soul, let this child come forth quietly."⁵⁴

In other prayers where God's name is associated with his intermediaries, a common practice is to call God's name first.⁵⁵ For instance, a woman's prayer during her daughter's puberty rite is translated thus:

'O Nyankopon Tweadumpon Nyame, receive this palm-wine and drink. Thursday Earth-Goddess, receive this palm-wine and drink. This girl whom God has given to me has menstruated today. Let not the Mother who dwells in the spirit-world take her away and cause her to have menstruated only to die. 56

Children are recognized as God's gift and to God these people ultimately turn for support in every stage of life.⁵⁷

Evans reports that in most of the Ashanti households there is an 'altar' which is dedicated solely to the worship of God.⁵⁸ Before such altars offerings are brought and prayers are offered to God on behalf of the family and the nation.⁵⁹ The following

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid., p.252.

59 Ibid.

prayer is just one example:

'Onyankopon Kwame, Twereduampon, Creator, who made the rain and made the sunshine, come with thy consort Asase Yaa and receive this offering, and let peace come upon this house and all this people. Long life to the Ashanti nation. May we never at any time suffer defeat.' 60

Life, peace and victory over enemies have their source in God, whom this people believe to be the Creator of all things.⁶¹

Prayer occupies a central place in Nuer life.⁶² At any place and any time, Nuer people offer their prayers to God.⁶³ A man on a journey prays for safety and deliverance from any misfortune.⁶⁴ Nuer pray for ability to bargain profitably with Arab Merchants.⁶⁵ They call upon God in order to receive gifts from the Merchants.⁶⁶

For the Nuer, to speak to God is not an act reserved for critical moments of life, but in times of happiness as well they communicate with God.⁶⁷ In consequence of their joy, they "often say a few words to him [God] as they go about their daily affairs."⁶⁸

60 Ibid., p.253.

61 Ibid.

62 E. E. Evans-Pritchard, NUER RELIGION, p.22.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid., p.23. Cf. Evans-Pritchard, "God in Nuer Religion," MAN'S RELIGIOUS QUEST: A READER, pp.571f.

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid.

In his comment on Baluba traditional ideas of God, Booth remarks that there are few examples of direct prayers to God because most of the prayers are channelled through Ancestors.⁶⁹ In dire conditions such as drought, they pray to God directly as exemplified in the following petition:

Oh Vidye, Father;
 Father of the dead, Father of the living,
 We are dying with out Children.
 Now all the food is dried in the fields.
 What shall we eat?
 Change! Notice us!
 It is you, Father who does not give to one alone.
 Who gives to the great, who gives to the small. 70

This prayer points out a people's turning to God whom they acknowledge to be the provider of their needs.⁷¹ It is a yearning that God should intervene in order to save the lives of his creatures.⁷² The prayer echoes God's authority to change the condition of his children.⁷³

A further indication of the Baluba people's awareness of their dependence upon God is expressed in another direct prayer to God in a non-emergency situation:

Lord God
 Give me life, a strong life
 Give me well-being
 That I may marry and have children
 That I may raise chickens and goats

69 Newell S. Booth, "The View from Kasongo Niembo,"
AFRICAN RELIGIONS: A SYMPOSIUM, p.62.

70 Ibid.

71 Ibid.

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid.

That I may have money, all sorts of goods
 That I may flourish in health and life
 My daughters belong to God
 My sons are his Children
 All that I have is his
 He is their Master. 74

As Booth rightly commented, the above prayer "sums up the faith of the Baluba."⁷⁵ For them, God is both the Source and the maintainer of life.⁷⁶ He gives all things including health, children, chickens and goats.⁷⁷ Whatever the Baluba people have belongs to him, the Master of all.⁷⁸ To this God they turn in prayer directly and indirectly as they face the day-to-day issues of life.⁷⁹

Among the Dinka, prayer constitutes a vital segment of their everyday experience.⁸⁰ Individually, although not very common, short petitions are addressed to God in order to seek his help.⁸¹ The more frequent and most common prayers are associated with public sacrifices.⁸² During sacrificial ceremonies, they invoke God to grant recovery to the sick, an end to the witch's activity, success for those engaged in fishing expeditions, security for the herdsman and their cattle, and protection for travellers.⁸³

74 Ibid., p.62. Cited from Bamuinikile-Mudiasa, LA MORT, pp.30f.

75 Ibid.

76 Ibid.

77 Ibid.

78 Ibid.

79 Ibid.

80 Godfrey Lienhardt, DIVINITY AND EXPERIENCE: THE RELIGION OF THE DINKA, pp.219ff.

81 Ibid.

82 Ibid., pp.219-251.

83 Ibid.

Some of the invocations are cited as follows:

So it is. You of my father, when a man has been speared, and the next day masters of the fishing-spear are called in to speak about it, then the wound will heal. It is you Divinity [who ordain] that that which you gave to us masters of the fishing-spear, if we have not misused it, [enables us] to pray with our mouths and Divinity will help us, and the edges of the wound will come together and it will heal. You of my father, you Flesh of my father, if we have not misused our powers, then you will help us. 84

This is a prayer in which a prophet - Master of the fishing-spear - calls upon God to heal a sick person.⁸⁵ God's help is needed to bring about the recovery of those that are unwell.⁸⁶

Another illustration is from a prophet's prayer for the safe passage of cattle across a river: "Let the cattle move, let the cattle move across the river. Which becomes dry, which is not to be deep: I have released the cattle [by Prayer]." ⁸⁷

Protection of the cattle at night in cattle-camps from enemies of the people and wild beasts such as lions is guaranteed by praying to God.⁸⁸ One of the main tasks of Dinka Prophets is to offer such prayers.⁸⁹

One further example of a Dinka prayer shows contrition for sin and the need for God to show mercy:

84 Ibid., p.231.

85 Ibid.

86 Ibid.

87 Ibid., p.241.

88 Ibid.

89 Ibid.

Children of the ants, we have suffered from dryness
 Why I am without cattle, why I am without pain -
 That is what I ask, ee!
 I am a man who boasted of himself
 I slaughtered in my greed my majok ox
 Children of Aghok, my father, the children of the
 ants are forsaken (?)
 /Yet/ my father the Creator indeed created men
 we honour our Lord (banydan yeku rok) that he may
 look in upon us 90

The Gikuyu of Kenya provide another example of the place of prayer as an act of worship in African traditional religions.

According to Gikuyu tradition, Ngai (God) must not be "needlessly bothered"⁹¹ unless the need to communicate with him is real and crucial.⁹² Thus, "at the birth, initiation, marriage, and death of every Gikuyu, communication is established on his /or her/ behalf with Ngai."⁹³ These four cardinal events require the blessing of Ngai and no time is lost in seeking his help.⁹⁴

The Gikuyu also pray for direction and protection when they assemble as a general Council to deliberate on matters affecting their community.⁹⁵ Prayer at such public meetings usually takes the form of call and response as in the following example where an elder

90 Ibid., p.243.

91 Jomo Kenyatta, FACING MOUNT KENYA: THE TRADITIONAL LIFE OF THE GIKUYU, p.237.

92 Ibid.

93 Ibid., p.234.

94 Ibid.

95 Ibid.

leads and the Assembly responds.

1. Say ye, the elders may have wisdom and speak with one voice.
2. Praise ye Ngai. Peace be with us.
1. Say ye that the country may have tranquillity and people may continue to increase.
2. Praise ye Ngai. Peace be with us.
1. Say ye that the people and the flocks and the herds may prosper and be free from illness.
2. Praise ye Ngai. Peace be with us.
1. Say ye the fields may bear much fruit and the land may continue to be fertile.
2. Praise ye Ngai. Peace be with us. ⁹⁶

As One who gives all things, Ngai is called upon to provide wisdom, peace, children, health, prosperity, food and rich soil for the land to remain productive. ⁹⁷

A large part of Gikuyu prayer life is linked with their sacrificial rites and offerings. ⁹⁸ Such prayers may simply be invocation to Ngai before sacrifice or benediction at the end of the sacrificial ceremony. ⁹⁹ At a sacrifice to Ngai for rain, a Gikuyu prayer is translated as follows:

Reverend Elder (God) who lives on Kere-Nyaga.
 You who make mountains tremble and rivers flood;
 we offer to you this sacrifice that you may
 bring us rain. People and Children are crying;
 sheep, goats and cattle (flocks and herds) are
 crying. Mwene-Nyaga, we beseech you, with the
 blood and fat of this lamb which we are going to
 sacrifice to you. Refined honey and milk we have

⁹⁶ Ibid., p.239.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Mbiti, CONCEPTS OF GOD IN AFRICA, p.198.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

brought for you. We praise you in the same way as our forefathers (ndemi na mathathi) used to praise you under this very same tree, and you heard them and brought them rain. We beseech you to accept this, our sacrifice, and bring us rain of prosperity. 100

This prayer points out a fundamental Gikuyu belief that all life depends on Ngai for continuing existence.¹⁰¹ The withdrawal of rain by Ngai puts the lives of the people and their livestock in grave danger of extinction.¹⁰² Consequently, an appeal is made to Ngai to accept the sacrifice and release the rain in response to the communal lamentation of both the people and their animals.¹⁰³

The occasion for a planting ceremony is also a time for prayer among the Gikuyu.¹⁰⁴ At one planting ceremony, an elder's prayer is cited as follows:

Mwene-Nyaga, you who have brought us rain of the season, we are now about to put the seeds in the ground; bless them and let them bear as many seeds as those of gekonyi. 105

It is significant that what can easily be taken for granted becomes a subject of prayer. For the Gikuyu, the seeds need to be blessed by Ngai in order to ensure their growth and fruitfulness.¹⁰⁶

Furthermore, the harvesting ceremony which takes place when the crops are within sight of harvest is another occasion for

100 Kenyatta, op. cit., p.247.

101 Ibid.

102 Ibid.

103 Ibid.

104 Ibid., p.252.

105 Ibid., p.253.

106 Ibid.

Gikuyu prayer.¹⁰⁷ When they come together to offer a sacrifice of acknowledgement of God's generous gifts of rain and the produce of the farms, the elders of the community often recite a prayer.¹⁰⁸

In one example, the words are translated as follows:

Mwene-Nyaga, you who have brought us rain and have given us a good harvest, let people eat grain of this harvest calmly and peacefully. Do not bring us any surprise or depression. Guard us against illness of people or our herds and flocks; so that we may enjoy this season's harvest in tranquility.

(Chorus): Peace, praise ye, Ngai, peace be with us. 109

Ngai has provided the rain and the harvest but the Gikuyu in this prayer realize that the fruits of the soil cannot be enjoyed unless the Giver himself provides the peace.¹¹⁰

In appreciation of who God is, the Chagga of Tanzania praise him in prayer:

We know you, "Ruwa", Chief, Preserver,
He who united the bush and the plain.
You "Ruwa", Chief, the elephant indeed.
He who burst forth men that they lived.
We praise you, and pray to you, and fall
before you. 111

107 Ibid., p.257.

108 Ibid.

109 Ibid., p.258.

110 Ibid.

111 Dundas, KILIMANJARO AND ITS PEOPLE, p.146.
Cited in Francis-Xavier S. Kyewalyanga,
op. cit., p.255.

Prayer as seen in the foregoing examples echoes traditional African peoples' consciousness of God to whom they owe their lives. This awareness is further evident in the act of sacrifice which they offer to God in their attempt to worship him. It is this act of worship, namely sacrifice, which this study now examines.

2. SACRIFICE

Here, the term 'Sacrifice' is taken to mean an act of worship whereby the worshipper offers something to God either directly or indirectly through intermediaries.¹ What is offered may include human beings, animals, drinks, foods - in fact anything considered acceptable and worthy of presentation to the Deity and his representatives.²

One more preliminary statement is that the primary objective of the following presentation is to show that sacrifice as an act of worship in African tradition provides a further indication of the traditional African peoples' recognition of their dependence upon God. In order to support this claim, this study will focus on the occasion or purpose of the sacrificial rites of some African peoples.

Most part of Yoruba sacrifices are offered to intermediary divinities who are supposed to pass on the offerings to Olódùmarè, the Deity.³ In the words of Idowu,

once the divinities have been offered their worship, the divinities in their turn will transmit what is necessary of it to Olódùmarè. It is left to the divinities to take what belongs to them by virtue of their position as authorised by Olódùmarè and remit to Him all that is His either to receive or to execute. 4

1 Cf. J. Omosade Awolalu, YORUBA BELIEFS AND SACRIFICIAL RITES, pp.134ff.

2 Cf. Ibid.; E. Bolaji Idowu, OLÓDÙMARÈ: GOD IN YORUBA BELIEF, pp.118f.; John S. Mbiti, CONCEPTS OF GOD IN AFRICA, pp.178ff.

3 E. Bolaji Idowu, OLÓDÙMARÈ: GOD IN YORUBA BELIEF, pp.142ff.

4 Ibid., p.142.

Despite this prominent role of intermediary deities, all sacrifices can only be declared valid or considered acceptable in the final analysis by Olódùmarè alone.⁵ In consequence of God's prerogative, at the end of every Yoruba offering or sacrifice, there is an appeal to God to grant his approval.⁶

Against this background, the purpose and occasion of Yoruba sacrifices and offerings are now outlined on the basis of the valuable findings of Idowu and Awolalu.

First, daily "Meal and Drink Offerings"⁷ are presented at the shrines for the primary aim of maintaining cordial links between the worshippers and the divinities.⁸ The Yoruba consider it necessary to be in close touch with the 'Powers' that sustain their lives.⁹

Secondly, thanksgiving sacrifices are regularly offered to Olódùmarè and his 'ministers' in appreciation for the gifts and blessings of life.¹⁰ The occasions for such sacrifices may include rich harvest, successful hunting and fishing expeditions, triumph over enemies and victory in tribal wars, when life is spared in an accident, the birth of a child and success in business enterprise.¹¹

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., p.52.

7 Ibid., p.121.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.; Cf. Awolalu, op. cit., pp.144-150.

11 Ibid.; Cf. Awolalu, p.150.

Thirdly, in response to a vow made to a divinity in order to get a particular favour, sacrifice is offered when what is asked for is granted.¹² Votive offering constitutes the people's desire to 'persuade' the divinity or divinities to respond precisely to a specific request.¹³ For example, a King who wants victory in a war makes a vow to the divinity in charge of warfare, a barren woman who desires to have a child makes a solemn promise to a divinity in order to have a child.¹⁴

Fourthly, in order to appease the anger of Olódùmarè or that of any of the divinities - signs of which may be rainlessness, famine, plague or grave illness - propitiation sacrifices are offered upon the advice of the oracle.¹⁵ Failure to observe the laws of Olódùmarè and his agents brings punishment and breakdown in friendly relations. In order to restore normal relationship, appropriate sacrifices must be offered.¹⁶

Fifthly, when it is known, usually by means of an Oracle, that a sick person is to die because a divinity is offended by the person's character or that some malignant spirits are after the person's life, the person could be saved by the death of a substitute - usually the sacrifice of a sheep.¹⁷ Substitutionary sacrifice also

12 Ibid., p.122; Cf. Awolalu, pp.150-152.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.; Cf. Awolalu, pp.150ff.

15 Ibid., p.123; Cf. Awolalu, pp.152-156.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid., pp.123-124; Cf. Awolalu, pp.158-159.

takes place when it is necessary to atone for a violation of an agreement, and when there is a change of occupation or interest due to harmful pressure.¹⁸

Sixthly, to avoid evil or misfortune and to prevent the spread of an epidemic from one village to another, the Yoruba sacrifice to divinities.¹⁹ The security or protection of either the individual or the community is guaranteed in preventive sacrifice.²⁰

Seventhly, when the foundation of "a house, village, or town"²¹ is being laid, the Yoruba offer sacrifice to the "spirit of the earth"²² for protection against all evil.²³ The significance of a place of human habitation requires an appeal to divinity to grant all necessary protection and help.²⁴

The primacy of foundation sacrifice in traditional Yoruba life may be summed up in Awolalu's statement that

foundation sacrifice is based upon the idea that all new enterprises undertaken by a man - setting out on a journey, beginning a new career, taking a wife, laying the foundation of a house, building a new bridge, or cultivating a virgin land - are to be committed to the care of the Supreme Being or other spiritual beings, if such enterprises are to be successful 25

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., pp.124-125; Cf. Awolalu, pp.156-158.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid., p.125.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid. Cf. Awolalu, pp.159-160.

24 Ibid.

25 Awolalu, op. cit., p.160.

One underlying recognition in the foregoing purposes or occasions of sacrifices and offerings among the Yoruba is the belief that human beings depend upon their Creator and his 'ministers' for their survival and ongoing life.²⁶

In Iboland, direct sacrifices to God are not common because of the role of numerous intermediary spirits.²⁷ However, as in the case of the Yoruba, God is believed to be the final recipient of all sacrifices, especially those sacrifices offered through "good spirits".²⁸ In his book, which has remained a notable contribution on sacrifice among the Ibos, Arinze outlines four aims of Ibo sacrifices.

The first purpose is to expiate for sins committed against God and all spiritual powers.²⁹ When any of the rules or laws believed to be established by God or the spirits at his service is broken, a "cleansing sacrifice"³⁰ must be offered in order to "regain the favour of the higher powers."³¹ While the details of actions that are considered sinful vary from one Ibo locality to another, "patricide, incest, stealing of yams and sheep, bestiality, wilful abortion, pregnancy within a year of the husband's death, suicide by hanging, and killing of sacred animals"³² are sins that are generally known in all parts of Iboland.³³ Appropriate sacrifices must be offered to

26 Cf. Ibid.

27 Francis A. Arinze, SACRIFICE IN IBO RELIGION, p.49.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid., p.34.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

remove the consequences of any of these sins.³⁴

At times, upon the advice of a diviner, sacrifices are offered for sins that are unknown.³⁵ As much as possible, it is necessary to eliminate anything that may provoke the anger of the 'Powers' that govern the lives of people.³⁶

The second purpose of sacrifice among the Ibos is to keep off evil spirits.³⁷ The world in which man lives is populated by good and evil spirits. The malignant spirits bring unrest to individuals and the community through their vicious activities. The Ibos offer sacrifices to keep these spirits far away from human habitation.³⁸

The third aim of Ibo sacrifice is to make special pleas before God and other spiritual beings to grant the desires of the people.³⁹ Through sacrifices, Ibos convey their petitions for such needs as long life, well-being, food, children, protection and success.⁴⁰ They offer sacrifices to Ancestors at funerals in order to request them "to accept the spirit of the deceased into their company, to overlook any of his past misdeeds, and to show the Ancestors that the living had good relations with the deceased and had nothing against his future happiness."⁴¹ The strategic role of Ancestral

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid., p.36.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid., p.37.

38 Ibid., pp.37, 55ff.

39 Ibid., p.38.

40 Ibid., p.40.

41 Ibid., p.41.

spirits as intermediaries compel their families on this earth to seek their aid for those who require membership of the spirit world.⁴²

Fourthly and lastly, Ibos offer sacrifices to God, Ancestors and other spiritual beings in order to express their gratitude for answers to their petitions and other gifts of life.⁴³ The occasions for sacrifices of thanksgiving include the birth of a child, especially when such a baby is born when the yams are ready for harvesting.⁴⁴ At the end of "an epidemic, after winning a large sum of money in a raffle, after recovery from sickness, triumph in war or in a land case . . . , and such happy occasions as the return of a member of the family after a long absence",⁴⁵ are among the occasions for thanksgiving sacrifices.⁴⁶

For the Ibos then, life is impossible without the sustaining aid of Chukwu, God, and his Servants - the intermediary deities.⁴⁷ This fact is partly affirmed in their acts of sacrifices to God and his messengers.

According to Nadel, the objectives of Nupe sacrifice include, first, the desire for posterity, health, food, rain and prosperity.⁴⁸ Secondly, they offer sacrifices to "ward off smallpox"⁴⁹ and all

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid., p.42.

44 Ibid., pp.42-43.

45 Ibid., p.43.

46 Ibid.

47 Cf. Ibid., p.111.

48 S. F. Nadel, NUPE RELIGION, pp.81, 88.

49 Ibid., p.91.

malicious things from the village.⁵⁰

Thirdly, at the ceremonies of birth, marriage and funeral, Nupes sacrifice to God for protection and guidance.⁵¹

Among the Kono of Sierra Leone, the selection of a new tract of land for cultivation is an occasion for sacrifice.⁵² The prosperity of the farm-work is believed to be in the hands of God and the go-betweens - Ancestral spirits and the Spirit of the earth. Therefore, the need to turn to them in sacrifice is an accepted fact of life for the Kono.⁵³

The several aims of Kono sacrifices and offerings may be summed up in the words of Parsons as follows:

For protection from harm; to secure wives; to bear children; to obtain wealth; to be loved by the paramount Chief, so that he will not fine them unjustly; to secure long life and at death to join their Ancestors; to have well-trained wives; to avoid unfair dealings with other clans; to avoid accidents. 54

Beyond the Kono people's admission of their helplessness in the face of crises is the belief that God and the intermediary divinities possess the power to help when they turn to them in the act of sacrifice.⁵⁵

50 Ibid., p.92.

51 Ibid., pp.115-131.

52 Robert T. Parsons, "The Idea of God among the Kono of Sierra Leone," AFRICAN IDEAS OF GOD: A SYMPOSIUM, p.266.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid., p.272.

55 Cf. Ibid.

For the Nuer, "turning to God in the rite of sacrifice"⁵⁶ constitutes a major act of worship.⁵⁷ Nearly every vital experience in life is an occasion for sacrifice.⁵⁸ For example, Evans-Pritchard sums up at length some of the occasions for Nuer sacrifice as follows:

When a man is sick, when sin has been committed, when a wife is barren, sometimes on the birth of twins, at initiation of sons, at marriage, at funerals and mortuary ceremonies, after homicides and at settlements of feuds, at periodic ceremonies in honour of one or other of their many spirits or of a dead father, before war, when persons or property are struck by lightning, when threatened or overcome by plague or famine, sometimes before large-scale fishing enterprises, when a ghost is troublesome, 59

As they come face to face with the daily crises and opportunities of life, the Nuer people turn to God for help and support through the rite of sacrifice.⁶⁰ They admit that they are weak and utterly helpless without God; consequently they do not hesitate to go before him and the spirits that minister to him.⁶¹ This way of life is in accordance with their religious persuasion which, in the words of Evans-Pritchard, "is dominated by a strong sense of dependence on God and confidence in him rather than in any human powers or endeavours. God is great and man is foolish and feeble, a tiny ant."⁶²

56 E. E. Evans-Pritchard, NUER RELIGION, p.197.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid., pp.197ff.

59 Ibid., pp.197-198.

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid., pp.45ff., 199ff.

62 Ibid., p.317.

Among the Dinka, every event in life offers an opportunity for sacrifice and "every bull or ox is destined ultimately for sacrifice" ⁶³ The purposes of their sacrifices include the following:

First, after the harvest, the Dinka make sacrifice for success. ⁶⁴ The abundance of harvest provides an occasion for offering sacrifice for the progress already realized and for that which is anticipated in the years ahead. ⁶⁵

Secondly, sacrifices are made for protection. ⁶⁶ The Dinka people are aware that they do not always live together in their permanent homes in the villages since many of them have to move out in search of pastures especially in the dry season. This inevitable movement is prone to several dangers, hence the need to make sacrifices for security. ⁶⁷

Thirdly, they offer sacrifices to Divinity and divinities for the purpose of obtaining "strength for battle with enemies" ⁶⁸ and to "prevail in life" ⁶⁹ as their forefathers did in the past. ⁷⁰

63 Godfrey Lienhardt, DIVINITY AND EXPERIENCE: THE RELIGION OF THE DINKA, pp.23ff.

64 Ibid., p.272.

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid., p.293.

69 Ibid.

70 Ibid.

Fourthly, on some special occasions, the Dinka make sacrifices in order to cure the sick and to enable barren women to conceive.⁷¹ When a person is sick, the kin and the community come together to offer sacrifice for the recovery of the sick.⁷²

Although Ancestors are most prominent in Lugbara sacrifices, God is not left out.⁷³ In his immanent aspect, sacrifices are offered to him.⁷⁴ Besides, God is believed to be behind nearly all relationships between Ancestors and the living offspring.⁷⁵ Not only does God provide "the total framework"⁷⁶ under which Ancestors play their own role, but also he retains the authority to reject or accept any sacrifice in his capacity as the "controller of all nature, including men and ghosts [Ancestors]: they are all his creatures."⁷⁷

This statement opens the way for pointing out some of the aims of Lugbara sacrifices.

First, one of the purposes of Lugbara sacrifices is to "re-create ties of lineage kinship that have been weakened by sin."⁷⁸ According to Lugbara belief, there is a strong cordial relation between God, Ancestors and the families who are still in the human

71 Ibid., p.272.

72 Ibid.

73 John Middleton, LUGBARA RELIGION: RITUAL AND AUTHORITY AMONG AN EAST AFRICAN PEOPLE, pp.85ff., 102.

74 Ibid., p.100.

75 Ibid., pp.85f.

76 Ibid.

77 Ibid., p.91.

78 Ibid., p.90.

flesh.⁷⁹ Sin disrupts this "ideal relationship",⁸⁰ impairs Lugbara social structure and upsets the tranquillity of the entire regional community.⁸¹ In order to review the bond of union and restore normal relationships, appropriate sacrifices are offered.⁸²

Secondly, some Lugbara sacrifices are aimed at strengthening the link between the living and the 'living-dead' - Ancestors.⁸³ Since these "fathers" who are in the spirit would still possess the power to punish as well as the wisdom to guide their living children, it is advantageous to fortify the normal link which both enjoy.⁸⁴

Thirdly, Lugbaras offer sacrifices in order to heal infertile women and livestock.⁸⁵ For them, barrenness is often a direct result of a repeated sin.⁸⁶ However, it can be cured and this requires going before fertility shrines to make suitable sacrifices.⁸⁷

The attention given to prayer and sacrifice in African tradition as seen in the foregoing brief discussion shows a sense of dependence

79 Ibid., pp.23f, 85f.

80 Ibid.

81 Ibid.

82 Ibid., pp.85ff.

83 Ibid., p.27.

84 Ibid., pp.27f.

85 Ibid., pp.69-70, 85-86.

86 Ibid.

87 Ibid.

upon God in African traditional religions. There is an awareness that every area of life is subject to direct or indirect control of the Supreme Being whose aid or blessing must be sought by the people he has created. In their daily encounter with the challenge that life poses, they yearn for and attempt to be in right relation with God and his divine agents. This way of life, namely an awareness of and response to God's pervading presence, provides a valuable springboard for developing a theocentric model of the Church.

III. AFRICAN TRADITIONAL IDEAS OF MAN

A. MAN IN RELATION TO GOD

1. MAN AS A BEING CREATED BY GOD

In African traditional religions, man is never thought to be his own Creator nor believed to be a product of an unaccountable "Big Bang." Man is a being created by God, according to African traditions.¹ There are indeed different accounts about how, when and where man was created but the fact that God, acting either directly or indirectly through an agent, brings man into existence is a common belief.² The idea that man has his origin in God may at times be stated directly or implied when the African traditional religionist declares that everything that exists is brought into being by God. What now follows is an attempt to illustrate the above position from the beliefs of some African peoples.

Talbot declares that a widespread belief in Iboland is the idea that Chineke created man.³ God, for the Ibo, is the Source-Being through whom mankind and other things came into being.⁴

1 Cf. Swailem Sidhom, "The Theological Estimate of Man," BIBLICAL REVELATION AND AFRICAN BELIEFS, pp.100ff.; J. Akin Omoyajowo, "The Concept of Man in Africa," ORITA: IBADAN JOURNAL OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES, 9 No. 1 (June 1975), p.37.

2 Cf. Ibid.; John S. Mbiti, AFRICAN RELIGIONS AND PHILOSOPHY, p.93.

3 P. Amaury Talbot, TRIBES OF THE NIGER DELTA: THEIR RELIGIONS AND CUSTOMS, p.19.

4 Ibid., Cf. Edmund Ilogu, "Christianity and Ibo traditional Religion," THE INTERNATIONAL REVIEW OF MISSIONS, 54 (1965), pp.335, 337.

Man has his origin in God, according to the Yoruba.⁵ Although God assigned the making of "man's physical features"⁶ to his highest-ranking divine Messenger, Orisa-nla, God himself provided the "personality-soul,"⁷ the life of man's being.⁸

Osanobua, God, among the Edo-speaking peoples of Nigeria, is regarded as the "creator of all things and beings,"⁹ having both human beings and "other deities"¹⁰ as his Children.¹¹

The fact that God created man, in Nupe tradition, is implied in the Nupe affirmation that "all things"¹² have their origin in God.¹³ For the Nupe, anything that is not created by God does not exist.¹⁴

The Ashanti trace the genesis of man to God who is held responsible for the creation of "all things."¹⁵ According to Busia, the Ashanti people believe that "the Creator gave a bit of his spirit to everyone whom he sent to the earth, and that with the gift of that bit

5 E. Bolaji Idowu, GOD IN NIGERIAN BELIEF, p.13.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 R. E. Bradbury, THE BENIN KINGDOM AND THE EDO-SPEAKING PEOPLES OF SOUTH-WESTERN NIGERIA, p.52.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 S. F. Nadel, NUPE RELIGION, p.12.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 K. A. Busia, "The Ashanti," AFRICAN WORLDS: STUDIES IN THE COSMOLOGICAL IDEAS AND SOCIAL VALUES OF AFRICAN PEOPLES, pp.192, 209.

of his spirit - the man's soul - was bound up that man's destiny, what he was to become and to do in the world."¹⁶

Man came into existence through God's act of creation, according to Mende belief.¹⁷ God completed his work of creation by making the primeval parents.¹⁸ Furthermore, the idea that man is a being created by God is testified to in some of their common phrases. For example, one translated expression is as follows: "God, the Chief, who made us."¹⁹ Sometimes when the Mende are in a crucial situation, they recall the fact that they are created by God.²⁰ For instance, the scarcity of rice in one of their cities produced a response which Harris and Sawyerr translated as follows: "'Let us just sit down; we are God's children, he made us, he will not allow us to die of hunger.'"²¹

In Nuer anthropology, man is created by God.²² Even the colours of the skins of human beings are in the Nuerview what God himself made from the beginning.²³ God also made "one man fleet and another slow, one strong and another weak."²⁴ Everything that goes

16 Ibid., p.209; Cf. same author, AFRICA IN SEARCH OF DEMOCRACY, p.7.

17 W. T. Harris & Harry Sawyerr, THE SPRINGS OF MENDE BELIEF AND CONDUCT: A DISCUSSION OF THE INFLUENCE OF THE BELIEF IN THE SUPERNATURAL AMONG THE MENDE, pp.2, 5ff.

18 Ibid., p.6; Cf. W. T. Harris, "The Idea of God among the Mende," AFRICAN IDEAS OF GOD: A SYMPOSIUM, p.278.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid., p.10.

21 Ibid.; Cf. W. T. Harris, op. cit., p.281.

22 E. E. Evans-Pritchard, NUER RELIGION, p.6.

23 Ibid., Cf. same author, "God in Nuer Religion," MAN'S RELIGIOUS QUEST: A READER, p.561.

24 Ibid.

into the making of what man is comes from God.²⁵

Among the Dinka, the origin of man is assigned to God.²⁶ One common myth of the Dinka about the creation of the first man speaks of God fashioning "men from mud"²⁷ just as the Dinka make their own "pots and toys"²⁸ from mud.²⁹ In another Dinka account, it is said:

The Creator created people in the East under a tamarind tree - or others say, on the bank of a great water. Their names were Abuk and Garang. He made them so small - only half the length of a man's arm - of clay, and laid them in a pot which he then covered. When he uncovered it, the two stood up and were complete and fully-grown³⁰

The first pair of human beings got married and from them other members of the human family descended.³¹

According to the Lugbara concept of man, God in his transcendent aspect brought into being the primordial man.³² God made a man named "Gborogboro ('the person coming from the sky') and a woman, Meme ('the person who came alone')."³³ Meme became the first mother with the birth of "a boy and a girl."³⁴ One Lugbara story locates the creation

25 Ibid., pp.6f.

26 Godfrey Lienhardt, DIVINITY AND EXPERIENCE: THE RELIGION OF THE DINKA, pp.4ff.; Cf. Francis Mading Deng, AFRICANS OF TWO WORLDS: THE DINKA IN AFRO-ARAB SUDAN, pp.52ff.

27 Ibid., p.40.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid., p.36.

31 Ibid.

32 John Middleton, LUGBARA RELIGION: RITUAL AND AUTHORITY AMONG AN EAST AFRICAN PEOPLE, pp.27ff.

33 Ibid., p.231.

34 Ibid.

of the primeval parents in Sudan at a site which Lugbaras call Loloi.³⁵

Man is a being who owes his origin to God, according to the view of the Baluba people.³⁶ God made "the first man and woman"³⁷ and provided them with life.³⁸ The life which God gave this original couple is passed on from one generation to another.³⁹

The notion that man is created by God is said to be part of the established faith of the Abaluyia peoples.⁴⁰ Man's existence is firmly attributed to the creative work of God.⁴¹ The Vugusu, an Abaluyian people, have a creation myth which speaks of God creating man in order that the sun may shine upon the man.⁴² The story goes on to say that the first man, named by the Vugusu as "Mwambu,"⁴³ needed someone as a companion.⁴⁴ God then made a woman called "Sela"⁴⁵ who became Mwambu's co-mate.⁴⁶

35 Ibid.

36 Newell S. Booth, "The view from Kasongo Niembo," AFRICAN RELIGIONS: A SYMPOSIUM, p.60.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Gunter Wagner, "The Abaluyia of Kavirondo," AFRICAN WORLDS: STUDIES IN THE COSMOLOGICAL IDEAS AND SOCIAL VALUES OF AFRICAN PEOPLES, p.28.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid., p.29.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

One of the beliefs of the Gisu of Uganda is that mankind is created by God.⁴⁷ They believe that God is "the creator of men and of the principal foodstuffs on which they subsist."⁴⁸

If one takes seriously the view that in African traditional religions there is a belief in God who is held responsible for the creation of all things, then it is appropriate to accept one implication of that affirmation, namely that man is a being created by God. Sidhom therefore makes a valid observation when he says: "The origin of man exhibits, according to African traditions, one common factor: man was created by God and that he has his origin in Him."⁴⁹

God and man are for ever linked together as a result of that act of God in creating man. This means that, in spite of man's pretence or rebellion to proclaim himself as "self-existent", man is for ever a creature who owes his entire life to God.

47 J. S. La Fontaine, THE GISU OF UGANDA, p.50.

48 Ibid.

49 Sidhom, op. cit., p.100.

2. MAN AS A DEPENDENT BEING

Next to the recognition that man is a being created by God is the belief that man is a dependent being. He is ultimately dependent upon God who made him and upon spiritual beings that are believed to be God's agents. He is also dependent upon his fellow-men.

The next few pages are devoted to giving examples of this view of man, particularly the belief that man ultimately depends on God.

Among the Ibos, there is a recognition of the fact that man depends on God in order to live and to survive the crises of life.¹ Man, they hold, ultimately hangs upon God for long life, well-being, food, rain, protection and prosperity.² When an Iboman makes sacrifices or offers prayers to God, he does express his dependence upon God.³ Basden underscores this point while speaking of the objectives of Ibo sacrifices. He says: "The insufficiency of man, and his consequent inability to walk uprightly, is recognised by the Ibo."⁴

In life or in death, the Ibo admits that man faces the reality of his dependence on God who alone has absolute dominion over the whole Creation.⁵ The Ibo is equally aware of the fact that the most powerful spirit or divinity can only succeed when there is authority or final approval from God.⁶

1 Francis A. Arinze, SACRIFICE IN IBO RELIGION, pp.10-11, 45.

2 Ibid., pp.34ff. Cf. Edmund Ilogu, "Christianity and Ibo traditional Religion," THE INTERNATIONAL REVIEW OF MISSIONS, 54(1965), pp.335f.

3 Ibid.

4 G. T. Basden, NIGER IBOS, p.59.

5 Arinze, op. cit., pp.45f., 111.

6 Ibid.

Like the Ibos, the Yorubas have a deep sense of man's dependence upon God. Man, they say, "lives and moves"⁷ only as God grants him permission to do so.⁸ The whole destiny of man is determined by God.⁹ In recognition of man's dependence upon God, Yorubas refer to God as "the owner or controller of this day or of the daily happenings."¹⁰ The success of man's plans as well as the realization of his hopes in this life and in the life beyond hangs on God.¹¹

It may be fair to assert that one of the underlying motives of Yoruba sacrifices and prayers is the awareness that the survival of man's life hinges on God and the ministering divinities. As Awolalu puts it: "They know that they depend upon these spiritual powers for material prosperity, for good health, increase in crops, in cattle and the the family"¹²

An essential aspect of Yoruba anthropology therefore sees man's continuing existence as utterly helpless without God's ultimate help and the aid of the several spiritual allies.¹³

7 E. Bolaji Idowu, OLÓDUMARÈ: GOD IN YORUBA BELIEF, p.53.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 J. Omosade Awolalu, YORUBA BELIEFS AND SACRIFICIAL RITES, p.12.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid., p.137.

13 Cf. Ibid.

The Nupe idea of man's ultimate dependence upon God can be inferred from their belief that God not only gives life to man but he also provides a means called "ritual" through which man could reach him for help.¹⁴ Man is subject to God for power and guidance which man needs in order to face the "problems of everyday life and for handling of the supernatural tools" designed for solving the crises of life.¹⁶

In their everyday speech, the sense of man's dependence on God comes through. A common phrase on their lips is what Nadel translates as "'with God's help.'"¹⁷

Furthermore, that the Nupe people offer sacrifice to God for the well-being of their village or community, deliverance from illness, wealth and productivity is an indication of their awareness of man's dependence on God.¹⁸

The Mende of Sierra Leone are aware of the fact that man ultimately depends on God for living. They believe that outside God's "aid and permission",¹⁹ it is impossible for anything to take place.²⁰ Human

14 S. F. Nadel, NUPE RELIGION, p.36.

15 Ibid., p.37.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid., p.13.

18 Ibid., p.31.

19 W. T. Harris and Harry Sawyerr, THE SPRINGS OF MENDE BELIEF AND CONDUCT: A DISCUSSION OF THE INFLUENCE OF THE BELIEF IN THE SUPERNATURAL AMONG THE MENDE, p.2.

20 Ibid.

beings and their activities, they affirm, are under God's "ultimate authority"²¹ and governance.²²

The idea of man's dependence upon God is further evident in the Mende belief that prayers and sacrifices, either offered directly to God or presented indirectly through Ancestral spirits, must end with the expression "gew jahun",²³ that is to say, "under the protection, or by the permission, of God,"²⁴ if one is to expect a response.²⁵ Similarly, no desire or hope of any man can be realized unless God's final approval is invoked.²⁶

This consciousness of man's dependence upon God is also seen in the Mendes' acknowledgement of the fact that man is in need of protection from thunder storms, deliverance from evil forces and everyday difficulties, victory over enemies, power and justice in day-to-day encounters with the issues of life.²⁷ This aid or power that man desperately needs is believed to come ultimately from God and his divine agents.²⁸

21 Ibid., p.3.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid., pp.3, 9.; Cf. W. T. Harris, "The idea of God among the Mende," AFRICAN IDEAS OF GOD: A SYMPOSIUM, p.282.

26 Ibid., p.9.

27 Ibid., pp.9-12.

28 Ibid.

Man, then, in Mende belief, ultimately depends on God who is "the great Chief without whose sanction all human effort is vain."²⁹

The Kono, as in the case of their neighbours the Mende, are aware of the fact that man is a dependent being.³⁰ They know that man's life is ultimately sustained by God whose authority is greater than those of the numerous spirits that are prominent in Kono daily affairs.³¹ Man is incapable of obtaining, through his own ability, the basic needs of life. The Kono therefore turn to the ministering spirits and ultimately to God for such provisions of life.³²

That man as a created being is ultimately dependent on God the Creator finds a place in Ashanti traditional beliefs. For them, man not only derives his life and destiny from God but also man is dependent upon God for the sustenance of that life.³³ Consequently, the Ashanti, through prayers and sacrifices, turn to God and his 'spiritual assistants' in order to obtain support for life's needs.³⁴

The Nuer people's understanding of man's relationship with God includes the notion that man is subject to God.³⁵ Man, they affirm,

29 Ibid., p.12.

30 Robert T. Parsons, "The Idea of God among the Kono of Sierra Leone," AFRICAN IDEAS OF GOD: A SYMPOSIUM, pp.261ff.

31 Ibid., p.276.

32 Ibid.

33 K. A. Busia, "The Ashanti of the Gold Coast," AFRICAN WORLDS: STUDIES IN THE COSMOLOGICAL IDEAS AND SOCIAL VALUES OF AFRICAN PEOPLES, pp.192, 196ff.

34 Ibid.; Cf. R. S. Rattray, THE ASHANTI, p.144.

35 E. E. Evans-Pritchard, NUER RELIGION, p.11.

is an impotent being without God's assistance.³⁶ In order to remain alive, man depends upon God for protection and the supply of his needs.³⁷

The Nuer correctly sees man as a being who cannot, on his own ability alone, sustain the life which God has given him. This awareness is partly demonstrated by their turning to God for help through prayers and sacrifices.³⁸

That man depends on God is also indicated in another Nuer belief which stresses man's accountability to God.³⁹ Man's conduct, they hold, is judged by God who dispenses reward or punishment according to his own will.⁴⁰

Man, in Dinka conception, stands in need of support from God and the 'minor' divinities.⁴¹ Man's attempt to be free from God brought man "suffering and death,"⁴² consequently making him a more dependent being.⁴³ From time to time, the Dinka admit, man seeks help from God through prayers and sacrifices in order to overcome his painful conditions.⁴⁴

As a child depends upon his earthly father, the Dinka believe, man is dependent upon the transcendent father of all mankind.⁴⁵

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid., pp. 7, 26.

38 Ibid., pp.317-318.

39 Ibid., p.16ff.

40 Ibid.

41 Godfrey Lienhardt, DIVINITY AND EXPERIENCE: THE RELIGION OF THE DINKA, p.38.

42 Ibid., p.37.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid., pp.37-38.

45 Ibid., p.41.

Human beings depend upon God who looks after them and brings them up, "like a human father with his children."⁴⁶

The above approach, which is not exhaustive but only illustrative, may be concluded with a reference to Busia's observation that behind African traditional religions stands "a philosophy of man which sees him as a created being dependent on his Creator."⁴⁷ This consciousness provides one of the foundations for developing a theocentric model of the Church.

46 Ibid.

47 Busia, AFRICA IN SEARCH OF DEMOCRACY, p.11.

3. MAN'S ALIENATION FROM GOD

Apart from the sense of being created by God and a consciousness of ultimate dependence upon him, there is also a belief that man's relationship with God is no longer what it used to be. Communication between God and man used to be at its best. Man experienced much of God's nearness and through that close relationship man had everything that he needed without hard labour or suffering. However, man lost that 'paradise'. Since the loss, there has been a feeling of alienation from God on the part of man. This sense of the loss of the original cordial and intimate relationship with God in African traditional religions is referred to here as man's alienation from God. The next few pages are devoted to examples of the nature of the harmonious relationship between God and man and the causes of the alienation.

In Nigerian traditional religions, there is a prevalent myth¹ about the nature of man's original relationship with God and the causes of his alienation.² The myth, according to Imasogie, speaks of a long period of cordial relations between God and man.³ The period witnessed man's frequent trips to heaven in order to obtain blessings from God. From time to time, God himself descended from heaven to

1 The term, myth, in this context, is defined as an oral narrative of a people's understanding of their worldview. Cf. E. Bolaji Idowu, AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION: A DEFINITION, p.84.

2 Osadolor Imasogie, Class Lecture on "The Myth of Man's Alienation," April 16, 1974, Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomosho, Nigeria. This lecture by Imasogie provides the greater part of the material for the Nigerian version of the 'myth of man's alienation' which is reported in this essay.

3 Ibid.

earth on long chains in order to settle most serious disputes between warring parties.⁴

Food was easy to get as people fed directly from the sky by cutting "a portion of the sky"⁵ any time that there was need to do so.⁶ There was much in store for man without any real labour or pain.⁷ Describing this state of life, Parrinder says: "In the past the sky could be touched and there was no need to work, God filled man's calabashes without them working."⁸

However, this state of paradise came to an end. Man no longer enjoys limitless access to God.⁹ This tragic loss of uninterrupted communication between God and man is attributed to human factors, some of which are indicated as follows.

In one explanation, the disobedience of one man brought about the end of the good relationship between God and mankind.¹⁰ The amount of food to be taken from the sky at a time for one's family, according to divine regulation, should never be more than what was needed for the family. The breaking of that rule by a greedy person altered the nature of man's relationship with God. The sky receded and the gap between heaven and earth widened.¹¹

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 E. G. Parrinder, AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION, p.40.

9 Imasogie, loc. cit.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

Another attempt to explain the cause of the disturbed relationship asserts that unending quarrels among men offended God since much of his time was spent on reconciliatory missions to earth.¹² It became necessary for God to stay further away from mankind.¹³

There is a further version which puts the cause of man's alienation on a woman's disobedience. When the sky was very near the earth, it was forbidden for any woman to touch the sky during her monthly period. A woman failed to comply with the rule and God decided to put an end to man's free and easy access to heaven.¹⁴

These different attempts to explain why man lost his original privileged position have at least one common factor, namely that man is responsible for his alienation from God.¹⁵

In Ghana, the Ashanti have a famous myth which speaks of a time when God lived very close to men and how God was 'forced' to move away from man's immediate reach.¹⁶ In the distant past, God, whose dwelling place was in the sky, lived very close to people.¹⁷ This closeness was brought to an end by an aged woman who constantly hit the sky with her pestle, an action which annoyed God and caused him

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.; Cf. E. Bolaji Idowu, OLÓDUMARÈ: GOD IN YORUBA BELIEF, p.22.

16 R. S. Rattray, ASHANTI PROVERBS, pp.20-21.

17 Ibid.; Cf. K. A. Busia, "The Ashanti," AFRICAN WORLDS: STUDIES IN THE COSMOLOGICAL IDEAS AND SOCIAL VALUES OF AFRICAN PEOPLES, p.192.

to move away from men.¹⁸ According to the oral tradition, the woman, together with her children, attempted to reach God through a 'tower of mortars'.¹⁹ They could not get to God because the whole project collapsed before it was completed.²⁰ There was massive destruction of human lives as a result of the fallen mortars.²¹ Thus, according to this Ashanti myth, man not only lost his nearness to God through his own sin, but he also failed to regain the original privilege through his own effort.²²

According to one of the myths found among the Dinka of Sudan, God once lived very close to man, a relationship which also accompanied blessings of immortality, well-being and free meal.²³ But this original idyllic state no longer exists.²⁴ In the beginning, according to the myth, God, man, the sky and the earth were not far apart.²⁵ A rope connected the earth to the sky and man could reach God by means of the rope.²⁶ Death was outside the experience of man and there was free grain to satisfy the first parents.²⁷ But God's regulation stood out clear: "They were forbidden to grow or pound

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Godfrey Lienhardt, DIVINITY AND EXPERIENCE: THE RELIGION OF THE DINKA, pp.33-34.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

more."²⁸ The cultivation or pounding of extra grain was prohibited.²⁹

Furthermore, the man and the woman were to be very careful not to raise their pounding stick or hoe too high in order to avoid hitting God.³⁰ However, after some time, the woman not only pounded more grain than was permitted, but she also hit God with her long pestle.³¹ The woman's action led to disastrous consequences. First, God ordered a bird to cut the rope that connected man to him and to the sky, thus putting an end to the easy access that man has enjoyed.³² Secondly, the free supply of food came to an end as people have to work hard in order to obtain their bread for living.³³ Thirdly, human beings no longer escape death, sickness and suffering.³⁴

Man's alienation from God, according to this version of Dinka oral tradition, traces the cause to man's act of greed and disobedience.³⁵

In one of their stories, the Bambuti of Congo tell how man lost the benefits of being close to God, resulting also in the coming of suffering and death.³⁶ The first three children ("two sons and one

28 Ibid., p.33.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid., p.34.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 Paul Schebesta, REVISITING MY PYGMY HOSTS, pp.177-181.

daughter")³⁷ whom God created enjoyed a close relationship with him, although they were commanded "never to seek Him out."³⁸ God talked to them, provided their needs, and they lacked nothing.³⁹ In the words of Schebesta: "They lived happily and satisfied and did not need to eat their bread through the sweat of their brows, for everything came to them and it was not necessary for them to exert themselves in the least."⁴⁰ It was a life "lived in an Utopia."⁴¹

This splendid relationship continued until the only daughter yielded to her long desire to see God. It was her responsibility to put a pot of water and firewood at the door of the hut where God lived. This task she had to execute without staying around to see God.⁴² But one day, she decided to hide herself and watch her Father reach out his arm from the hut in order to take inside what the daughter had placed at the entrance to the hut. Then, "God stretched forth His arm, which was well covered with brass rings, outside His abode to take in the pot. She had seen it - the richly adorned arm of God. How her heart rejoiced!"⁴³ But it was a tragedy,

37 Ibid., p.177.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid., p.178.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

a sin which brought heavy punishment upon mankind.⁴⁴

From then on, God decided to live separately from man. Toil and hard labour became the means of obtaining the basic needs of life.⁴⁵

God provided the first men with "weapons and tools, taught them the use of the forge"⁴⁶ and the art of earning their living.⁴⁷ Further-

more, the first woman would be wife to her brothers and would give birth in pain. She would go through all kinds of hard work.⁴⁸

Death was also introduced.⁴⁹

Since God's departure to his separate place of abode, "no one has seen Him. But with God went also happiness and peace, and everything which he formerly offered them freely went from the people: water, fish, game and all kinds of fruit."⁵⁰

Man, therefore, lost his close relationship with God and the many benefits that flow from that intimate relationship. From that time on, a feeling of alienation from God has become an element of man's experience.⁵¹

The main thrust of the above myths about man's alienation from God is more than an attempt to develop or to back-up a doctrine of a

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid.

"withdrawn God", in consequence of man's disobedience. The emphasis appears to be a recognition of a spoilt relationship between man and his Maker.⁵² It is an awareness of the fact that the whole existential relationship between man and God has been gravely marred. Faced with this consciousness, man, in African traditional religions, has been groping for a restoration, a yearning which is often expressed through sacrifices and prayers.⁵³ This awareness, no matter how vague or dim, offers a viable starting point for the Christian apologist to point out that the reconciliation which the African traditional religionist has been groping for has been accomplished by God himself in the person of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. This being so, a relevant ecclesiology for the African, reared in this worldview, has to take seriously the fact that the same God whom the African traditional religionist responded to dimly in his religious tradition is the very One, in fact, the Only God, who in Jesus Christ of Nazareth reconciles the world to himself. By the same token, that is, by reason of that worldview, a relevant doctrine of salvation for the African who is immersed in that tradition has to be a concept of salvation which involves man's total life.

52 Cf. Imasogie, loc. cit.

53 Ibid.

B. MAN IN RELATION TO HIS FELLOW-MEN AND HIS ANCESTORS

1. MAN AS A BEING IN RELATION TO HIS FELLOW-MEN

If there is an aspect of African traditional beliefs that is generally accepted by writers within and outside the continent without any major disagreement, it is the belief that man exists or lives in relation to his fellow-men. Man is believed to be vitally associated with the immediate family, the extended family, the clan or the tribe. It is a relationship which is largely based on a common ancestry and which extends beyond the living members of the family to those members who have taken their places in 'the land of the spirits'. As Westermann puts it: "The whole of existence from birth to death is organically embodied in a series of associations, and life appears to have value only in these close ties."¹

Man does not live alone because he is part of a corporate existence. He belongs to the community which starts from the immediate family unit and stretches beyond that layer of existence to include other families of the same tribe.² Commenting on his experience after visiting a number of African villages, Vanier says: "I realise that through their rituals and traditions they are deeply living community life. Each person has a sense of belonging to others; men of the same ethnic origin or village are truly brothers."³

There is an awareness that the individual is nothing without the group and the community itself cannot exist without the individual.⁴

1 Diedrich Westermann, THE AFRICAN TODAY, p.148.

2 Cf. J. V. Taylor, THE PRIMAL VISION: CHRISTIAN PRESENCE AMID AFRICAN RELIGION, pp.85ff.

3 Jean Vanier, COMMUNITY AND GROWTH, p.6.

4 Cf. Bonganjalo Goba, "Corporate Personality: Ancient Israel and Africa," BLACK THEOLOGY: THE SOUTH AFRICAN VOICE, pp.65ff.

It is a relationship in which the individual participates in the lives and activities of the community while the community carries out its obligations towards the individual.⁵ This relationship is aptly expressed by Mbiti in what he rightly calls an African maxim: "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am."⁶

Man lives in relation to others. This idea of man having no entirely separate existence from his fellow-men finds expression in virtually all areas of traditional African life. However, this study will only indicate some of the areas.

Religious observance⁷ is one area of life where man lives in relation to others. The individual, in traditional African society, automatically accepts the religion of the community in which he is a member.⁸ What Kibicho says of the Kikuyu of Kenya is certainly true of many in Africa. He states: "To be a Kikuyu automatically means to be a believer in the Kikuyu religion."⁹

5 Ibid.

6 John S. Mbiti, AFRICAN RELIGIONS AND PHILOSOPHY, pp.108-109. Appears also in his "Harmony, Happiness and Morality in African Religion," THE DREW GATEWAY, 4, Part 2, (1973), p.108. Cf. Similar versions: "I am because I participate" in Taylor, op. cit., p.85; "I belong therefore I am" in Max Warren, SOCIAL HISTORY AND CHRISTIAN MISSION, p.159.

7 The dividing line between this category of life and others to be considered here is not a solid one because religion, as noted earlier in this study (p.86, et passim), pervades all areas of traditional African life. However, this distinction at this point of the study is only intended to enhance the clarity of the following discussion.

8 Cf. S. G. Kibicho, "African Traditional Religion and Christianity," A NEW LOOK AT CHRISTIANITY IN AFRICA, p.15.

9 Ibid.

The religious faith of the community is spontaneously the faith of the individual.¹⁰ The individual becomes conscious of the fact that his life is for the family or community, and vice versa, through the acceptance or participation in the religious faith of the kindred group. When, for example, an Ibo father in the family or an Ibo Priest in the village pours libation, offers sacrifices and prays for the well-being of the family or the community, the individual member of the group sees such an act of worship as that which is performed on his own behalf and that of the entire people.¹¹ He knows that he belongs to and lives in close association with others. In communal worship, at such occasions as planting, harvesting, laying the foundation of a new building, naming and marriage ceremonies, seasonal festivals of thanksgiving, times of severe illness, epidemics, famine and drought, the individual is made aware of the corporate nature of his existence.¹²

The notion of man existing or living in relation to others is further exemplified in the celebration of the events that are connected with the cardinal points of an individual's life such as birth, puberty, marriage and death.¹³

10 Ibid.

11 Cf. Francis A. Arinze, SACRIFICE IN IBO RELIGION, pp.24ff., 62ff., 78.

12 Edmund C. O. Ilogu, CHRISTIAN ETHICS IN AN AFRICAN BACKGROUND: A STUDY OF THE INTERACTION OF CHRISTIANITY AND IBO CULTURE, pp.49-52; Also Ilogu, "Christianity and Ibo Traditional Religion," THE INTERNATIONAL REVIEW OF MISSIONS, 54 (1965), pp.336-337.

13 Cf. John B. Taylor (Ed.), "Group Reports: B. Community," PRIMAL WORLD-VIEWS: CHRISTIAN INVOLVEMENT IN DIALOGUE WITH TRADITIONAL THOUGHT FORMS, pp.46ff.

From birth and all through his life pilgrimage, the individual is not alone. Being born into the family marks the beginning of a life journey in relation to other fellow-men. At the Yoruba naming ceremony, for example, the officiating man welcomes the baby to the community on behalf of the family, extended relatives and friends as follows: ""In the names of our forefathers and of the family and those gathered here, I welcome you to our family and to the community.""¹⁴ Those who are present at the ceremony are reminded of their collective responsibility towards the nurture and upbringing of the baby.¹⁵

In addition to the "official name," that is, the name which the parents give to the baby, each well-wisher present at the ceremony has the opportunity to give the baby a name and at the same time drop a coin in a bowl of water.¹⁶ Each person who does that expresses three things:

- "(1) He is expressing his oneness with the child's family spiritually and economically.
- (2) He is asserting his seniority over the child and hence
- (3) his right to send the child on errands when he grows up." 17

There is, in this ceremony, a demonstration of communal solidarity. An event in an individual's life has summoned together members of the

14 Osadolor Imasogie, Mimeographed Lecture Notes on "Thematic Features in African Traditional Religion," (1979), p.4.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

community for the celebration of life which they all owe to God.¹⁸
 As the celebrants partake of the food and drinks which are provided for the occasion, Ancestral spirits are also offered kola nuts and wine in recognition of the fact that the baby "is now incorporated not only into the human community but also into the nexus of relationship involving the protection by the Ancestral spirits."¹⁹
 The individual lives in relation to others right from childhood.²⁰

The initiation of a boy or a girl into adult life demonstrates the traditional African belief that man's life is life with others.²¹
 The Chagga of Tanzania, for example, at the initiation ceremonies of their children into the tribal society impress upon the initiates that they have no independent existence outside their filial connections and their ties with members of the larger tribal community and the Ancestors.²²

Among the Akamba of Kenya, boys are circumcised and girls undergo clitoridectomy as part of the initiatory rites which are designed to enable them become full participants in the community life of Akamba people.²³ The occasion brings together members of the community in order to celebrate their corporate existence.²⁴

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 John V. Taylor, THE PRIMAL VISION: CHRISTIAN PRESENCE AMID AFRICAN RELIGION, p.94.

22 Ibid.

23 John S. Mbiti, AFRICAN RELIGIONS AND PHILOSOPHY, p.122.

24 Ibid., pp.122ff.

The celebrants dance, sing, drink and pour libation to their Ancestors, as an expression of their common link with one another.²⁵ Gifts are also presented to the initiates as "tokens of welcome into the full community."²⁶

At another stage of the Akamba incorporation ceremony of the young into adult community life, the initiates are kept in huts, located outside the villages, for special training and instructions on various aspects of adult and community life.²⁷

The participation of the individual and members of the society in these rites of incorporation of the young into the tribal community is an indication of the belief in the corporate nature of man's existence.²⁸

The idea of man as a being who exists in relation to his fellow-men is expressed in marriage and its accompanied ceremonies. Marriage, in many parts of traditional Africa, is not simply a union between the bride and the bridegroom but the joining together of two families. As the authors of the book, AFRICAN CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE, put it: "African customary marriage was not a private contract between two individuals but an alliance between two family communities or lineages."²⁹

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid., p.123.

27 Ibid., pp.123ff.

28 Ibid., pp.125ff.

29 Benezeri Kisembo, Laurenti Magesa and Aylward Shorter, AFRICAN CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE, p.182.

Throughout the preparation for marriage, the actual wedding ceremonies and the living of the marital life itself, there is a collective participation involving the bride, the bridegroom, their families, and friends within the community, at the clan, village or tribal level.³⁰ Commenting of the celebration of marriage among the Gikuyu of Kenya, the authors of the book referred to above made the following comments:

The local community of neighbourhood and village participated at every stage of the marriage process. Not only did they share in the feasts and the dances, but they gave public testimony to what was going on. By their participation they gave their assent to the marriage, and expressed their expectations concerning it. They were far from passive witnesses. Together with the family, they joined in admonishing and instructing the newly-weds, in blessing and anointing them, in shouting their approval at the speeches of others, in remembering details of the rites to be performed³¹ and making sure that all was done as it should be.³¹

The man is expected not only to identify himself fully with his wife but also he is to become part of the wife's family - sharing their needs, joys, failures and successes.³² The same is expected of the woman with regard to her husband's family.³³ A Zulu Pastor's address to the newly-wedded Paul and Mapule certainly speaks for many in traditional Africa. The Pastor declares:

Mapule, you should bear in mind that though you are married in Church, we Africans, according to our custom and tradition (consider) that you are married not to your husband Paul, but to his family.

30 Ibid., pp.183ff.

31 Ibid., p.187.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

That means you have to identify completely with all his relatives, look after them, care for them, go out of your way to make them happy. If you do that, you will have no cause for regret. You, Paul, will have to do likewise with Mapule's relatives. Her people are your people and vice versa. Both of you will notice that old people in the community will tend to visit you, even for a brief moment, not necessarily to drink tea, but to show their interest in your welfare. 34

A man who takes a wife is at the same time declaring his responsibility towards the wife's family, and the same is true for the woman.³⁵ Among the Ibos, for example, it is reported that: "Two families are linked together in a kind of 'brotherly relationship' when a boy and a girl from these two families get married."³⁶ The two families become concerned about each other's welfare and prosperity. They come together for "mutual assistance, defence and trade."³⁷ This underscores the belief that an individual is part of a communal existence.

Even at death, the individual is not alone. The occasion of a person's death brings together relatives, friends and other sympathisers from the clan, village or tribal community.³⁸ Awolalu states this sense of belonging as follows:

34 Ibid., p.182.

35 Ibid.

36 Ilogu, op. cit., p.29.

37 Ibid.

38 J. O. Awolalu, "The African View of Man," ORITA: IBADAN JOURNAL OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES, 7 No.2 (December 1972), p.114.

When a person dies in a family, it is not only the immediate members of the family that share in the sorrow and in the funeral ceremonies, but all those who are in any way connected with any of the members of the family also rally round to give a befitting burial to the deceased.³⁹

Not only do people come to share their sorrow at the departure of a member of the community but they also sing, dance, feast and make sacrifices as a celebration of their communal existence.⁴⁰

The deceased also depends upon the living relatives and other members of the community for assistance in the journey to the spirit world. In many parts of traditional Africa, it is believed that when a person dies a decent or a proper funeral rite is necessary in order to help the deceased person to join other members of the family who are already in the spirit world.⁴¹ For instance, among the Ibos, when a person dies, it is believed that the spirit leaves the body and hovers around the homestead until it is aided to join the community of the Departed ones, through appropriate funeral rites.⁴² As the deceased is expected to join other members of the family in the spirit world, the Yoruba, for example, send messages through the newly-deceased person to those relatives who are already in the world of the spirit.⁴³ This underlines the belief that communication and communion

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 Ilogu, op. cit., p.42.

42 Ibid.

43 E. Bolaji Idowu, OLODUMARE: GOD IN YORUBA BELIEF, p.190.

with members of the family is not terminated by physical death.⁴⁴

It also underscores the notion that physical death does not annul man's relationship with his fellow-men.⁴⁵

The fact that man lives in relation to his fellow-men is not only evidential in the above cardinal events in man's life but it is also manifested in traditional African community projects. Such co-operative undertakings are very often carried out at the family or village levels. For example, among the Ibos, there is community help in building houses, construction of roads and celebration of social events.⁴⁶ For them, Arinze declares: "To exist is to live in the group, to see things with the group, to do things with the group."⁴⁷ As Arinze himself also points out, the Ibos are not alone in this belief.⁴⁸ Many African peoples, in their traditional setting, hold the belief that life is not to be lived in isolation but in relation to others in a particular community.⁴⁹ In her study of the Luo of Kavirondo, Jassy speaks of the mutual co-operation which runs through many facets of their society.⁵⁰ According to Jassy: "Men worked together in clearing the land, in building dwellings,

44 Cf. Osadolor, op. cit., pp.10-11.

45 Ibid.

46 Arinze, op. cit., pp.4-5.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

50 Marie-France Perrin Jassy, BASIC COMMUNITY IN AFRICAN CHURCHES, p.9.

in hunting, in guarding the herds, and in defending their common goods."⁵¹ Mutual help, among the Luo, is considered as a way of life.⁵²

Man's existence, for many peoples in traditional Africa, is an existence in relation to his fellow-men. Man is always part of his particular community. This sense of belonging helped to create a dynamic community life as in the case of their religious observance, their celebration of cardinal events in life such as birth, puberty, marriage and death, and their participation in communal projects.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid., pp.2-13.

2. MAN IN RELATION TO HIS ANCESTORS

There is a vital link between man and his Ancestors in African tradition.¹ Physical death does not put an end to man's relationship with his Ancestors. On the contrary, man's sense of belonging to and association with members of the family who have entered into the spirit world is strengthened and assumes additional dimension.² As 'citizens' of the spirit world, Ancestors or the 'living-dead' are believed to have enormous power to protect their offspring, grant to them success in life, safeguard societal rules for orderly relations, and punish the living members of the family who break the customs and traditions of the community and who pay no serious attention to Ancestral presence and needs.³ They are also thought to act as intermediaries between the living members of the family and God.⁴

In return, those members of the family who are still on this earth give to their Ancestors food and drink and honour their presence through offerings and sacrifices.⁵ The sense of belonging to one another is kept alive or expressed through a dynamic relationship of

1 Cf. Aylward Shorter, AFRICAN CULTURE AND THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH, pp.60f.; E. G. Parrinder, AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION, pp.57ff.

2 Ibid.

3 Cf. John S. Mbiti, AFRICAN RELIGIONS AND PHILOSOPHY, pp.83ff.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

mutual dependence and reciprocal responsibility towards each other.⁶ Many scholars or students of African traditional religions will agree with Smith when he says: "It is an essential element in African belief that 'living' and 'dead' live in symbiosis, interdependent, capable of communicating one with the other. No iron curtain separates them."⁷

It is necessary at this point to illustrate the above understanding of man's link with his Ancestors by pointing out such ideas as are found in the traditional religion of some African peoples.

Among the Ibos, man lives in a very close relationship with his Ancestors.⁸ The "presence and power"⁹ of Ancestors is believed to add zest to man's everyday life.¹⁰ Man therefore turns to them through prayers and sacrifices for success in business enterprises and for the protection of all members of the family against forces of evil.¹¹ Talbot quotes an Ibo Chief as saying: "'When a man sets out for trade, fishing or indeed any business, he has always in mind that the spirits of the Ancestors are round him, ready to help in

6 Ibid.

7 Edwin W. Smith, "The Whole Subject in Perspective: An Introductory Survey," AFRICAN IDEAS OF GOD: A SYMPOSIUM, p.24.

8 Stephen N. Ezeanya, "God, Spirits and the Spirit World," BIBLICAL REVELATION AND AFRICAN BELIEFS, p.43.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

difficulty or danger and eager to bring prosperity to the House."¹²

In their status as invisible members of the family, Ancestors are believed to show great interest in the total well-being of their offspring who are still in the flesh.¹³ The Ibos believe that Ancestors intercede for the living before God and the divinities in order to guarantee the welfare of the individual and the clan community.¹⁴ They are mediators who constantly take the requests of their 'children' to God.¹⁵

From their side of the relationship, the living observe the customs and traditions which Ancestors either established or obeyed in their life-time.¹⁶ To disobey or to ignore any such rules brings Ancestral displeasure and punishment upon the individual and the village community.¹⁷ In this respect, Ancestors have to be feared because their anger could lead to severe sickness and ill-fortune. Of course, their wrath can be averted when appropriate offerings are made.¹⁸

Furthermore, the living-dead are invited to share in the family meals.¹⁹ At the commencement of almost every meal in an Ibo family,

12 P. Amaury Talbot, TRIBES OF THE NIGER DELTA: THEIR RELIGIONS AND CUSTOMS, p.258.

13 Francis A. Arinze, SACRIFICE IN IBO RELIGION, p.19.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Edmund Ilogu, "Christianity and Ibo Traditional Religion," THE INTERNATIONAL REVIEW OF MISSIONS, 54 (1965), p.336.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Talbot, loc. cit.; Cf. Arinze, loc. cit.

a small portion is first thrown on the ground for the Ancestors as their names are invoked to come and share the family meal.²⁰ It is reported that in certain parts of Iboland "it is forbidden not to reserve some food in the pots during supper lest the Ancestors come and find the pots empty."²¹ Ancestors must not be left to 'starve', for such a neglect could be disastrous for the well-being of the whole family.²²

The Yorubas provide another example of the concept of man in relation to his Ancestors. An appropriate remark by Lucas on this subject is worth citing. He says: "The Yorubas piously believe that the spirits of the departed members of the family are never far away, and they are ready to take an active part in all matters pertaining to the welfare of the family or of the community."²³ There is an "indissoluble union existing between the living and the dead members of the community."²⁴ The kinship solidarity which exists between man and his Ancestors while the latter were on earth as human beings continues into the spirit world where those 'Departed ones' now reside.²⁵

20 Ibid.

21 Ezeanya, op. cit., p.44.

22 Ibid.

23 J. Olumide Lucas, THE RELIGION OF THE YORUBAS, p.137.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

The living-dead continue to maintain an active interest in the family and in the tribal community. They remain as "spiritual superintendents of family affairs,"²⁶ watching over the life and activities of their offspring.²⁷

Whenever the family is in a deep crisis, the Yorubas believe that their Ancestors do communicate the type of action to be taken in order to bring about relief or solution to the problem.²⁸ They disclose their intentions or give aid to their offspring at any time and place.²⁹

Furthermore, as mediators between men, the divinities and God, the Yorubas believe that their Ancestors convey their prayers and sacrifices to God.³⁰

Part of the responsibility of the living towards the living-dead among the Yorubas includes constant supply of food and drink.³¹ Ancestors should never be left without adequate response to their needs because if they are left to suffer, the living have to bear the consequences, some of which may be misfortune, prolonged labour or any other form of illness.³² It is also essential to keep them happy and contented through orderly behaviour and fulfilment of any obligations towards them in order to ensure their co-operation in the

26 E. Bolaji Idowu, AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION: A DEFINITION, p.184.

27 Ibid.

28 Idowu, OLODUMARE: GOD IN YORUBA BELIEF, p.191.

29 Ibid.

30 Idowu, AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION: A DEFINITION, pp.184f.

31 J. Omosade Awolalu, YORUBA BELIEFS AND SACRIFICIAL RITES, p.61.

32 Ibid.

pursuit of family or community prosperity and welfare.³³

Among the Ashanti, there is a strong tie between man and his Ancestors.³⁴ Everyday, the Ashanti pour libations to these 'Departed' members of the family or clan.³⁵ Whenever an Ashanti family has prepared its food, a small portion of the food is first given to Ancestors, for they too must share the family meal.³⁶

In addition, each Ashanti lineage has its own Ancestral shrine where food and drink are offered to the Ancestors at appropriate times and seasons by the head of the family.³⁷ Before such shrines, Ancestors are requested to assist in sustaining members of the family and to increase the productivity of the farm crops.³⁸ They are called upon to help increase the size of the family and to ensure good health for all members of the lineage.³⁹

At every moment, the Ashanti believe that Ancestors keep their eyes upon their offspring, either to protect them or to discipline the unfaithful members of the family.⁴⁰ In the words

33 Ibid.; Cf. Idowu, AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION: A DEFINITION, pp.184-185.

34 K. A. Busia, "The Ashanti," AFRICAN WORLDS: STUDIES IN THE COSMOLOGICAL IDEAS AND SOCIAL VALUES OF AFRICAN PEOPLES, pp.201ff.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid., p.202.

38 Ibid.; Cf. R. S. Rattray, THE ASHANTI, p.105.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid., p.201.

of Busia: "They punish those who break the customs, or fail to fulfil their obligations to their kinsfolk. To such people, they send misfortune and illness or even death."⁴¹ But those who honour the customs and keep the rules of the lineage are assisted and blessed by Ancestors.⁴² The Ashanti, therefore, attach much importance to their Ancestors, whom they believe help to sustain life.⁴³

The reality of man's relationship with his Ancestors is never doubted by the Mende.⁴⁴ Ancestors, although already in the spirit world, are still part of the living family, not as passive members but as active participants in the lives of the living relatives.⁴⁵ They are powerful agents, capable of ensuring the welfare of both the immediate family and the extended family or the tribe.⁴⁶ They are believed to exercise their authority in the maintenance of orderly conduct within the family and in the clan or tribe. Any of their descendants who ignore the family customs are subject to their disciplinary action which could be illness, bad-luck or any other form of punishment which the particular Ancestor or Ancestors

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 W. T. Harris and Harry Sawyerr, THE SPRINGS OF MENDE BELIEF AND CONDUCT: A DISCUSSION OF THE INFLUENCE OF THE BELIEF IN THE SUPERNATURAL AMONG THE MENDE, pp.15ff.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid., p.15.

consider appropriate for the offence.⁴⁷

Ancestors, in Mende conception, also aid the living on their rice farms by keeping away wild birds and animals.⁴⁸

There is another dimension of their relationship with the living relatives. They act as intermediaries between their descendants and God.⁴⁹ As spirits, the Mende believe, Ancestors have easier access to the Supreme Spirit than the living and are therefore approached by them to pass on to God their requests and sacrifices.⁵⁰

Man's relationship with his Ancestors, in Mende conception, is certainly not one-sided. The living have the responsibility to honour the living-dead, their Ancestors.⁵¹ The Mende, like many other African peoples, offer their Ancestors food and drink.⁵² They also contribute to the well-being of their Ancestors by obeying the "moral sanctions"⁵³ which their Ancestors most cherished during their days on earth as human beings.⁵⁴

Among the Lugbara, "living and dead of the same lineage are in a permanent relationship with each other."⁵⁵ No aspect of the lives

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid., pp.15-16.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid., p.15.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

55 John Middleton, LUGBARA RELIGION: RITUAL AND AUTHORITY AMONG AN EAST AFRICAN PEOPLE, p.26.

of the living escapes the knowledge or attention of the 'Departed' ones, who remain conscious of the "actions" and "thoughts" of their offspring.⁵⁶ In general, they are concerned about the contentment of their 'children' and are believed to have an undeniable right to punish their descendants who offend them.⁵⁷

As part of their own obligation towards their Ancestors, the living relatives on earth offer them food and drink.⁵⁸ They work to maintain the prosperity of the lineage on their behalf.⁵⁹

The foregoing presentation is intended to indicate that traditional African ideas of man include the belief that man lives in relation to his Ancestors. Man's existence is never in isolation from the members of his family who have entered the spirit world. This sense of belonging which defies physical death should not be ignored in an attempt to develop an image of the Church which is primarily intended to respond positively to the spiritual yearnings of peoples who are immersed in such a world-view.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid., pp.26-27.

58 Ibid., pp.27, 55.

59 Ibid.

C. MAN IN RELATION TO LIFE-AFTER-DEATH

As indicated above, the idea that physical death does not put an end to man's life is found in African traditional religions. In general, the spirits of those who are physically dead continue to live in the spirit world and are at the same time involved actively in the lives and activities of their relations still on earth. But there is another aspect of life-after-death, and that is the final judgement. Therefore, at this point of the study, the main task is to show that man faces judgement after death. To point out such a belief is to reject at once any suggestion that the notion of a final judgement is not found in African traditional religions.¹ It may be that the emphasis on God's judgement in this present world upon wrong-doers, as found among many peoples in traditional Africa, tends to hide the idea of a final judgement from a casual observer. However, the following examples do point to such a belief in African traditional religions.

Among the Yoruba, the spirit of the deceased has to 'kneel' before God or at times before God's Deputy, Obatala, in order to account for his or her life while on earth.² In their everyday speech,

1 Mbiti's view that "African peoples do not expect any form of judgement in the hereafter," with the exception of "one or two" peoples, is not to be given much weight, as evidence of a belief in a final judgement is more widespread. John S. Mbiti, CONCEPTS OF GOD IN AFRICA, p.259.

2 E. Bolaji Idowu, OLODUMARE: GOD IN YORUBA BELIEF, pp.199ff.; Cf. J. Olumide Lucas, THE RELIGION OF THE YORUBAS: BEING AN ACCOUNT OF THE RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES OF THE YORUBA PEOPLES OF SOUTHERN NIGERIA, ESPECIALLY IN RELATION TO THE RELIGION OF ANCIENT EGYPT, p.256.

the Yoruba do make reference to the final judgement which awaits everyone.³ It is common to hear them say what Idowu translated as follows:

"All that we do on earth,
We shall account for kneeling in heaven."⁴

No one can hide any aspect of his or her character from the Supreme Judge.⁵

According to Yoruba belief, when Olódùmarè has given his verdict, the innocent person is welcomed and received into "the heaven of the Fathers"⁶ by members of the family who are already in the spirit world.⁷ This is seen as a reunion with one's kindred and not a coming together of all the faithful from all tribes and nations.⁸

Life in "the heaven of the Fathers" is organized after the order of life on earth, with less restrictions on movement and better conditions of living.⁹ The 'Departed ones' who live in that land of the living-dead communicate with their relatives on earth and are said to have the opportunity to be reborn and live again as human beings.¹⁰

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., p.199.

5 Ibid.

6 J. Omosade Awolalu, YORUBA BELIEFS AND SACRIFICIAL RITES, p.59.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Idowu, op. cit., p.100.

10 Ibid.

But those who are found guilty have no place in "the heaven of the Fathers", and are not welcomed by other members of the family who are in the spirit world or those on earth.¹¹ They are assigned to a place of suffering called "the Orun of potsherds."¹² This place which is designed for the wicked is described by Parrinder as "a celestial rubbish-heap, like the midden-heap of every village where broken pots are thrown . . . , or it may be compared to a kiln, where there are charred fragments of pots, hot and very dry."¹³ For those found guilty by Olodumare, life-after-death is a painful life. Their spirits are restless and are without a permanent abode.¹⁴ They can also be degraded and turned into lower creatures in consequence of their wicked character.¹⁵

Among the Ibos, after the performance of proper funeral rites, the spirit of the deceased returns to the spirit world to meet the Master of Creation, the Supreme Being.¹⁶ The departed relatives in the spirit world are said to come together in order to receive and to welcome the newcomer.¹⁷ If the character of the deceased was "good"

11 Ibid., p.197.

12 Ibid.; Cf. Stephen S. Farrow, FAITH, FANCIES AND FETICH OR YORUBA PAGANISM, p.133.

13 G. Parrinder, WEST AFRICAN PSYCHOLOGY: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF PSYCHOLOGICAL AND RELIGIOUS THOUGHT, p.107.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.; Cf. Idowu, op. cit., p.100.

16 G. T. Basden, AMONG THE IBOS OF NIGERIA, p.199.; Cf. Same author, NIGER IBOS, p.283.

17 Ibid.; Cf. Parrinder, op.cit., p.108.

while of earth, the deceased enjoys the possibility of a rebirth into the earthly realm at some point of its life.¹⁸ But one who is found to be wicked is sent out of the spirit world and away from the inhabitants of the earth.¹⁹

According to the Tiv of Nigeria, the spirits of the Departed are judged in the Sky.²⁰ The premier Ancestor of the human race is charged with the responsibility of separating the "good" from the "bad".²¹ Those who are acquitted "are passed on to God (Aondo), and go to dwell in a celestial town."²² But the wicked are despatched to occupy the "'bad bush',"²³ a place of loneliness, removed from the destination of the innocent.²⁴

The Jukun (Nigeria) believe that when a man dies, the spirit goes to the underworld, the abode of the Departed.²⁵ Each spirit appears before the Supreme Judge, named "Ama".²⁶ Those found guilty of grave crimes, such as taking a person's life or causing prolonged illness, forfeit their privilege of rebirth.²⁷ They are kept in the "'land of red earth',"²⁸ a place of eternal lostness.²⁹ Those whose

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.; Cf. Edmund Ilogu, CHRISTIAN ETHICS IN AN AFRICAN BACKGROUND: A STUDY OF THE INTERACTION OF CHRISTIANITY AND IBO CULTURE, p.43.

20 Parrinder, op. cit., p.109.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid., p.110.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

offences are not as grave are sentenced to temporary homelessness and are without food.³⁰ When the allotted time for their punishment and purification is over, they share in the chance of rebirth into this earthly existence.³¹

Life-beyond, among the Jukun, is believed to be without "sickness, and all tears are wiped away."³² However, the occupations which men pursue while on earth are carried on in life-after-death.³³

Among the LoDagaa of Ghana, belief in a final judgement is found in their eschatology.³⁴ This judgement takes place in "the land of Ancestral spirits"³⁵ or, as it is also called, the Country of God."³⁶ It is a collective judgement and it involves the separation of all women and their posterity from men.³⁷ In the women's class, there is a further grouping, whereby each woman and all her children together with their offspring form one group. After this division, the counting of the number of "bad people" in each group then takes place.³⁸ If any group has a large number of

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid., pp.110-111.

34 Jack Goody, DEATH, PROPERTY AND THE ANCESTORS: A STUDY OF THE CUSTOMS OF LODAGAA OF WEST AFRICA, pp.371ff.

35 Ibid.,p.371.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid., p.373.

38 Ibid.

either thieves, liars or witches, that class receives all the wretched things in the spirit land, "everything that brings pain. Salt water will be their only drink."³⁹ The woman of good character, together with all her offspring, gets "good things, pleasant things - good food and plenty of rest."⁴⁰

The men who are found to be of noble character no longer have to cultivate the land.⁴¹ They are free from farm-work and they eat whatever they want to eat at any given time.⁴² But the evil men have to suffer. They are punished for over a thousand years and thereafter pardoned by God in response to their complaints about the cause of their suffering.⁴³ However, they still have to farm in order to obtain their food.⁴⁴

On the basis of the above examples of African traditional belief in a final judgement, one could make at least three concluding observations that are considered valuable to this present essay. First, belief in a final judgement implies that man has to take his present life on earth seriously, since the way in which man lives his life on earth forms the basis of the judgement. Any doctrine

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

which attempts to undermine that belief not only encourages man to sin in this present world but also exposes man to punishment in life-beyond.

Secondly, the belief in a final judgement reinforces the reality of a life to come.

Thirdly, God gives the ultimate verdict about man's final destiny. Man cannot escape the reality of his ultimate dependence upon God, the Supreme Being who gives to every man the final recompense.

IV. THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE FOREGOING
AFRICAN IDEAS OF GOD AND MAN FOR
A THEOCENTRIC MODEL OF THE CHURCH

At this point of the study, it is necessary to summarise the implications of the foregoing aspects of traditional African notions of God and man for a theocentric model of the Church.

Firstly, in view of the traditional African firm belief in a Supreme God who is held responsible for the creation of all things, it is important to identify this God as the One who brought the Church into existence. He is the same God who has unveiled Himself as Jesus Christ of Nazareth. To hold Him responsible for founding the Church may help to eliminate the unfortunate belief of some African converts who are led to think of foreign Missionaries as 'importers' of a "foreign God", who is to be worshipped alongside 'Africa's God'. This understanding also assists in rejecting any attempt to regard the Church as an 'ecclesiastical colony', brought about by agents of 'Western imperialism'.

Secondly, the belief that the whole Creation is sustained by God provides a strong basis for emphasizing or developing the idea that the upbuilding of the Church is ultimately an act of God. No Church can grow or remain alive without its members being conscious of their absolute dependence upon God.

Thirdly, the belief that God is Supreme Judge of all Creation and that He judges both now and hereafter calls for an understanding of the Church which does not ignore the fact that its members also come under God's judgement in this world and in the world to come. If the

Church is to continually face the challenge of its call to reflect God's character in its everyday life, then it cannot afford to lose sight of God's chastisement.

Fourthly, traditional African belief in God's uniqueness provides a valuable background for developing the idea that God alone is worthy of the worship of members of the Community which He has founded. By virtue of His pre-eminence, God deserves a response of worship from all His creatures. God's pre-eminence also demands that those who seek to worship Him should do so in reverential fear and confidence in His abundant Grace.

Fifthly, although traditional African worship of God falls short of a whole-hearted devotion to God because of the immense attention given to intermediary divinities, a transformed concept of worship should go beyond a 'one-day-of-the-week' type of worship. While the setting apart of one day in the week for a full concentration on worship is not rejected, worship ought to be part of everyday living. The fact that the occasions for prayers and sacrifices in African traditional religions cover virtually all aspects of life provides a fruitful milieu for encouraging an understanding of worship which pervades all dimensions of life. If this is so, then a view of worship which does justice to the African background and yet gives the African tradition a transformation is, in the view of this essay, that which sees worship as a celebration of God's existence - a celebration of who God is and what he does.

Sixthly, while the notion of several intermediary spirits between God and man cannot find a place in a theocentric Community, the very concept of intermediary spirits itself makes it imperative for the Church to emphasize the sufficiency and finality of the intermediary

role of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. God has offered Himself as the Supreme intermediary, the all-sufficient mediator who supersedes all other mediators.

Seventhly, traditional African awareness of God's transcendence and immanence is so overwhelming in daily life that it cannot be ignored in the Church's understanding of its own life, particularly in relation to God. A doctrine of the Church which intends to respond to that aspect of the traditional African worldview needs to develop or emphasize the idea that a theocentric Community is a community that is conscious of its absolute dependence upon God at every moment of its life. In the Church's self-understanding, there is no room for a pretence or a denial of the fact that its success in life rests ultimately on its unceasing consciousness of its dependence upon its transcendent and immanent Lord.

Eighthly, in a tradition where there is great emphasis on communal living based on the belief that man lives in relation to others, particularly in relation to others of the same family, clan or tribe, a theocentric model of the Church cannot ignore such a view of life if it is to be of particular relevance to such people. The Church ought to be a Community where its members live as sharers of a common life and not a place to live as isolated or so-called independent individuals. This sense of belonging also provides an opportunity for developing a concept of responsibility for a theocentric Community. The responsibility of a theocentric Community is a God-centered onus. It is not an egocentric responsibility but an obligation which is carried out solely for God's Glory and for the benefit of all God's Creatures.

Ninthly, another aspect of traditional African concepts of God and man which has implication for a theocentric model of the Church is the notion of man's alienation from God and the subsequent yearning for a restoration. Given that type of background, it is necessary to develop the idea that the Church is a Community of those who experience a restored relationship with God and their fellow-men. But if this idea of the Church as a reconciled Community is to make any existential impact upon the daily life of the African convert, no attempt should be made to draw a solid line between reconciliation with God and reconciliation with one's neighbour - the person who belongs to another tribe or ethnic group.

Tenthly, the fact that traditional African anthropology begins with God and ends with God has an implication for a theocentric model of the Church. It compels such a doctrine of the Church to underline the idea that the Church not only owes its origin to God but it also owes its consummation to God.

CHAPTER THREE

THE CHURCH AS A THEOCENTRIC COMMUNITY

CHAPTER THREE

THE CHURCH AS A THEOCENTRIC COMMUNITY

I. INTRODUCTION

This chapter is devoted to the development of the main objective of this dissertation, namely that the Church is a theocentric Community. It is a God-centered Community of re-created persons, brought into being by the redemptive action of one God who has unveiled himself as God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. To regard the Church as a theocentric Community is both a contribution to African Christian ecclesiology and a rejection of the tendency to identify the Church exclusively with one member of the Godhead.

The expansion of the above ecclesiological image of a theocentric Community will cover such areas as the membership of the Community, its worship, its growth, its responsibility and its consummation. This study will argue that the Community's worship, growth, responsibility and consummation ought to be God-centered. The Church as a theocentric Community has no other viable alternative than to remain God-centered in all aspects of its life.

The next preliminary undertaking before embarking on the main task of this chapter is to sketch the biblical basis for the theocentric Community model. The necessity for doing so grows out of the conviction that the model is not just coming out of an African tradition but it has a strong root in the teachings of the Holy Scriptures.

The Bible speaks of God as the Creator who alone brought into existence the whole Creation.¹ But not only is God portrayed in the

1 Genesis 1:1; Ephesians 3:9. These references, as in the case of other biblical references to be cited in this Introduction, are only taken as examples, from among many other relevant passages.

Scriptures as the Maker of all things,² God is also identified as the sustainer of all that he has created.³ God, according to the testimony of the Holy Scriptures, is also unique, transcendent in all his attributes.⁴

Furthermore, the Bible introduces man as a being created by God.⁵ Man is, for ever, related to God because of that action of God in bringing man into existence. He owes his life to God who made him and who sustains him. He is to live in perfect peace with God and in harmony with his fellow-men, as well as with his environment. However, man has to submit himself to the will of God. He is to obey God, for only in doing so, can he fulfil the purpose of his existence, namely to glorify God and to enjoy the peace and love of God.⁶

But the Bible also speaks of man's rebellion against the Author of his existence. Man chose to do what God told him not to do.⁷ By doing so, he turned away from God as an ill-judged attempt to assert himself as a being who is completely independent of his Creator. This rebellion on the part of man plunged man into an unspeakable idolatry, a self-centered and idol-centered state of life in which it became impossible for man to fulfil the purpose of his existence.⁸

2 Isaiah 44:24.

3 Psalms 104.

4 Isaiah 40:12ff.; Ephesians 4:6.

5 Genesis 1:26-27.

6 Genesis 1:26ff.

7 Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7.

8 Cf. Romans 1:18-20.

However, God, not willing to abandon man in that state of self-destruction, took a decisive step to bring man back to himself. God called Abraham out of the bondage of idolatry and self-centeredness to a life of God-centeredness.⁹ The call opens a very significant chapter in God's redemptive action for mankind. For when God called Abraham, God promised to bless him and his posterity, as well as the rest of mankind through Abraham and his offspring.¹⁰ This blessing upon the nations of the Earth includes the bringing about of a reconciliation between God and man, and between man and his fellow-men. The blessing involves the coming into being of a God-centered Community of re-created persons who will once more participate in a communion of love with God who made them and with their fellow-men - those with whom they have a common origin.

The Creation of such a Community by God, is, in the considered view of this essay, traced to the occasion when God and Abraham's progeny, Israel, entered into a covenant relationship on Mount Sinai.¹¹ One key biblical passage which provides an account of God's establishment of Israel as a God-centered Community reads as follows:

9 Genesis 12:1-3; 17:1-2.

10 Ibid.

11 This study is also aware of other alternative views as to the historical origin of the Church. The discussion of such views is not considered essential to the development of the main point of this essay. Earl D. Radmacher, for example, has surveyed some of the different views in his book, THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH, pp. 193-205.

'Thus you [Moses] shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel.' 12

When the people of Israel heard these words, they all answered in one accord: "'All that the LORD has spoken we will do.'" ¹³

On this occasion on Mount Sinai, God has offered to Israel, as a Nation, an opportunity to re-enter into a life of communion of love with him as their God. Israel accepted the invitation, thus marking the beginning of a Community that is to be God-centered in all aspects of its life. The Community is to obey God's voice and also keep God's Covenant. This has to be so, because in a God-centered Community, self-centeredness and idol-centeredness will not be tolerated by God who brought the Community into existence. From that day on, Israel has been summoned to be a people whose whole life is to be centered on God. The entire life of the people is to be lived in conscious response to the leadership of God. The people have become God's "own possession", ¹⁴ a reconciled people who are no

12 Exodus 19:3-6. (R.S.V.).

13 Exodus 19:8. (R.S.V.).

14 Exodus 19:5. (R.S.V.).

longer to live according to the dictates of their self-centered desires, or by false feelings derived from imaginary deities and idols but through submission to the will of the only Living God.

God makes Israel his "own possession", but not for the benefit of Israel alone, for God's redemptive concern embraces all mankind. It is God's desire to reconcile all the families of the Earth to himself and by direct consequence they might also become reconciled to each other.¹⁵ In pursuance of this redemptive aim, God brings into being a Community that is to have its life centered on him as its Lord, a Community that is to play an active role in God's programme of redemption. God's redeeming love is to be proclaimed to the nations and Israel, as a Community of people who experience that saving love of God, is called upon to live out before the rest of mankind what it means to be a God-centered Community.¹⁶

But the Holy Scriptures point to the fact that Israel was not always successful in responding to God's leadership. In fact, Israel's history as a Community that is to devote its entire life to God has been heavily punctuated with failure.¹⁷

However, God does not allow his redemptive programme to be ruined by the failure of the people that he has graciously gathered for a communion of love and for the working out of his purpose for the rest of mankind. At the appropriate time in God's plan of

15 Cf. Romans 9:1 - 11:36.

16 Isaiah 42:1-9; Romans 15:8-12.

17 Cf. Hosea 4:1 - 13-16; Romans 2:17 - 3:8.

redemption and in a most extraordinary way, God appeared as Jesus Christ of Nazareth.¹⁸ He came to bring new life to the Community that has suffered defeat and to expand it beyond the borders of Abraham's immediate offspring in order to include all who are willing to be enrolled from all tribes on Earth.

This unique action by God in bringing about a revived and an enlarged God-centered Community has no parallel in history. First, God as the Son Jesus Christ of Nazareth came to live among men, offered his life as a ransom for the sins of mankind, rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. Yet, he lives on Earth in the mystery of his Presence as the Holy Spirit.

Secondly, God's dramatic initiative in re-creating a people whose lives must be devoted to him makes possible the coming together of peoples from all tribes on Earth to glorify him in their lives and to partake of his love and peace. It is an extraordinary love-action in which God has made possible the return of the rebellious creatures, the reconciliation of humanly-impossible irreconcilables, the gathering together from all corners of the Earth of all those who are willing to be assembled in the name of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Finally, God in Jesus Christ of Nazareth and in the power of the Holy Spirit has made it possible for all those who acknowledge him as Lord of their lives to assemble in their various localities and cultures to worship him in truth and in spirit - to celebrate his

18 Galatians 4:4-5.

existence as God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

II. THE COMMUNITY AND ITS MEMBERSHIP

The discussion that now follows under this topic, namely the Community and its membership, centers on the question, how does one become a member of the theocentric Community? It is hoped that the answer to this question will provide this essay with an opportunity to call for a re-examination of the problem of 'Converted polygamists',¹ and their membership of the Church in Africa, particularly in Nigeria.

In order to become a member of the Church or God-centered Community at both the universal and local level, this study recognizes four steps: the initiative of God in issuing the invitation, the human response of faith in God, the incorporation of the believer by the Holy Spirit and the reception of the Convert by the local Church or Community.

A. GOD'S INITIATIVE

No one can become a member of the Church unless there is first and foremost an invitation from God. According to the witness of the Holy Scripture, the Call of Abraham and the subsequent summoning of Israel to become a Community of people whose life is to be devoted to God rests absolutely on God's own initiative.² Neither Abraham nor Israel

1 The phrase, 'Converted polygamists', refers to people who were polygamists before their Confession and acceptance of Jesus Christ as their Saviour and Lord. Furthermore, the term "polygamy" in this study refers to a form of marriage where a man has more than one wife at the same time. Cf. Eugene Hillman, POLYGAMY RECONSIDERED: AFRICAN PLURAL MARRIAGE AND THE CHRISTIAN CHURCHES, p. 11.

2 Genesis 12:1-3; Exodus 19:1-9.

could turn to God without the first step which involves the issuing of an invitation by God.

In a similar manner, when God in Jesus Christ and in the power of his Holy Spirit re-created the Community, God took the initiative to invite people to be assembled in his name.³ Through the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, men and women received an invitation to turn to God for their salvation, and to become members of the Community of those whose lives are to be centered on God.⁴ God also continues to call people to come and be re-united with him and with their fellow-men through the convincing work of the Holy Spirit.⁵

The initiative of God in calling men and women to repentance and thus to become members of the Community of people that is named after him, is also seen in the mandate which he has given to all believers to proclaim the Good News of his gift of life.⁶

Becoming a member of the Church therefore has its first step in God's initiative in issuing an invitation to anyone from all tribes of the Earth.

B. MAN'S RESPONSE

Following God's initiative in issuing the invitation, there is the human response of faith in God as the second decisive step in

3 Cf. Acts 2:39; L. Cerfaux, THE CHURCH IN THE THEOLOGY OF ST PAUL, pp. 176ff.

4 No solid distinction is made here between being saved through faith in Jesus Christ of Nazareth and being a member of the Church. Cf. Karl Barth, CHURCH DOGMATICS, IV/I, pp.759ff.

5 Cf. John 16:7-11.

6 Matthew 28:19-20.

becoming a member of the God-centered Community. This faith in God consists of the respondent's acceptance of God's invitation, the believing and trusting in God for working out his purpose for all those who have positively responded to the call to walk with him as their God and Lord. The believer, in this response, acknowledges who God is and what he has done to bring about the redemption of man for a life of fellowship of love. This faith in God is also the believer's willingness to become a member of the Community of people whose primary aim in life is to glorify God.

On Mount Sinai, when God invited Israel to become a God-centered Community, a people dedicated to him, the response was clear: "'All that the LORD has spoken we will do.'" ⁷ It is Israel's response to God. Furthermore, when God re-created this Community through his Son Jesus Christ, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, many people from among Jews and Gentiles, responded by declaring their faith in God through Christ. ⁸

To this day, people from all parts of God's world continue to respond to his call to turn to him. These men and women entrust their lives to God through Jesus Christ. This human response of faith in God is a necessary step for the convert's membership of the Community. ⁹

7 Exodus 19:8 (R.S.V.).

8 Cf. Acts 2:41-42; 4:4; 18:8.

9 Cf. Claude Welch, THE REALITY OF THE CHURCH, pp.42ff.

Here, the emphasis on man's response does not obscure God's initiative and priority in making possible the very basis of man's response. For without God's initiative in calling man to repentance, it is impossible for man to respond to God's gracious act of redemption. But to suggest, as Aulén does, that membership of the Church or God-centered Community has only to do with "the Call and election of God"¹⁰ without the human response of faith in God,¹¹ is to undermine man's freedom to choose either to follow God or to remain in his sinful state of life. Faith in God as man's response to God's initiative is an essential step in the believer's membership of the theocentric Community.¹²

C. INCORPORATION BY THE HOLY SPIRIT

Having answered God's call through faith in Jesus Christ, the believer is incorporated into the God-centered Community or the Church by the Holy Spirit. As one passage of the Holy Scripture puts it: "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one Body - Jews or Greeks, slaves or free - and all were made to drink of one Spirit."¹³ By this act of God, the believer enters into Communion with the Lord of the Community and is at the same time united in Spirit with all other believers who constitute the "One Body".¹⁴ The estrangement which he

10 Gustaf Aulén, THE FAITH OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH, pp.350ff.

11 Ibid.

12 Cf. Donald Guthrie, NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY, p.626.

13 I Corinthians 12:13. (R.S.V.)

14 Ibid.

suffered before his conversion comes to an end as the Spirit brings him back to God and his fellow-men.

D. RECEPTION BY THE COMMUNITY

As a result of the Spirit's action upon the convert, the believer is led to participate in the life of the Community of believers within a given locality. The conversion experience which the believer has through the operation of the Holy Spirit imposes upon him an obligation to worship and to serve God in the company of other believers.¹⁵ When such a believer comes before the local Community of believers, the Community owes its Lord a responsibility to welcome or receive the new disciple on behalf of the one Lord of the Community.

The Community's reception of the convert involves the baptism of the believer in the name of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, who has graciously assembled each of them. In receiving a new follower of the Lord through the rite of water baptism, the Community carries out one of the Commands of its Lord: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,"¹⁶

When the Community obeys its Lord in this manner, the Community demonstrates its solidarity with the convert. It rejoices over the fact that the Lord of the Community has added another one to its number. Furthermore, on this occasion, the members of the Community recall, with thankfulness to God, their own experiences of God's love which has made possible

15 Cf. Hebrews 10:24-25.

16 Matthew 28:19 (R.S.V.).

their salvation and their coming together in his name.

This experience of being welcomed or received into the Church or God-centred Community is of crucial importance for the new convert. He is assured of the Community's friendship and love in his life pilgrimage. The experience reminds the initiate that henceforth his commitment to love God and his neighbour has the support of other members of the Community who are also committed to the same goal. The reception gives the believer an opportunity to publicly acknowledge God's gift of a new life. In submitting himself to the baptism which the Community carries out on behalf of its Lord, the convert openly declares his allegiance to the founder and sustainer of the Community, the God of all Creation.

E. CAN A 'CONVERTED POLYGAMIST' BE A MEMBER?

If what is said above concerning membership of the Community is to be of any specific contemporary relevance, especially for the Church in Africa, then this study cannot fail to call for a re-examination of the Church in Africa's attitude towards 'converted polygamists'. With the exception of only a few Churches, most of the Churches in Africa refuse to receive into their membership converts who are married to more than one woman.¹⁷ Their attitude may be summed up from a declaration of principle by one of the Churches as follows:

Recognizing monogamy as the ideal state of family life according to the New Testament, this Convention places on record its adherence thereto. No known polygamist

17 For example, the Lutheran Church of Liberia has adopted a policy of receiving these converts into full membership of the Church. Hillman, op. cit., pp.192ff.

shall be allowed membership in our Churches, to hold any office in the Church, to act as a lay preacher, or to participate in the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper. 18

'Converted polygamists' are allowed to attend Sunday worship services and some of the weekly meetings of the Church. Most of the Churches recommend or encourage the polygamist to hold to one of the wives and to divorce the rest in order to be accepted into the Church and enjoy the privileges of membership of the Community.¹⁹

The above attitude of the Church has far-reaching consequences for the Church and the Gospel of Christ, and for the 'converted polygamist' as well as for his family. It is because of these consequences, examples of which are indicated below, that this essay wishes to call for a change in the Church's attitude.

1. There are serious consequences for the Church and the Gospel of Christ.

a. The Church's attitude in requesting a 'converted polygamist' to become a monogamist before admission into the local Church undermines Biblical emphasis on faith in Christ as the sole prerequisite for Church membership.²⁰ While the Church as a God-centered Community has every right to promote monogamy as an ideal form of marriage, in deciding who is to be received into the Community on behalf of its Lord, marital status should never take precedence over faith in God through Jesus Christ. The Church is more than a social club whose admission ticket is one man, one wife.

18 "Book of Reports, Nigerian Baptist Convention 65th Annual Session, Kaduna (April 2-6, 1978)", p.13.

19 Cf. Hillman, loc. cit.

20 Cf. Lesslie Newbigin, HONEST RELIGION FOR SECULAR MAN, p.74.

b. When the Church bans a believer from taking part in the Communal Celebration of the life, death and resurrection of his Saviour and Lord because the believer has more than one wife, the Church unintentionally reduces the Lord's Supper to an ecclesiastical feast of bread and wine for believers who are monogamists.

c. In refusing to baptize a disciple of Christ who has more than one wife the Church makes the convert regard its baptism as a kind of 'holy bath' for 'monogamous Christians'. Karl Barth may well be speaking for many when he says: "Situations can and do arise, therefore, in which it would be sheer brutality for the Christian Church to confront men with the choice between baptism and institutional polygamy."²¹

d. When the Community accepts the offerings, tithes and financial support of a Convert who is a polygamist and yet refuses to receive such a person into its membership, the Church unfortunately creates the impression that money takes precedence over love for the total well-being of the believer.

e. Potential converts who are polygamists are scared away from acknowledging Jesus Christ as their Saviour and Lord because they do not want to face the risk of being asked to hold on to one of their wives and divorce the rest.²² The return of the sheep to the sheepfold is not only hindered but also the number of the sheep in the sheepfold is kept to a few in spite of the availability of sufficient room for any sheep that is willing to come back to the fold on hearing the Call of the "good Shepherd".

21 Karl Barth, CHURCH DOGMATICS, III/4, p.203.

22 Cf. Geoffrey Parrinder, THE BIBLE AND POLYGAMY: A STUDY OF HEBREW AND CHRISTIAN TEACHING, p.3.

2. For a 'converted polygamist' who accepts the Church's recommendation to keep one of his wives and send the rest away, the consequences are enormous.

a. The entire family unit is immediately divided into several warring parties depending upon the number of wives or children involved. The whole family set-up is disrupted with resultant social, economic and psychological crises.²³ When a man divorces his wife or wives in a system where marriage involves families and extended families of the bride and bridegroom, personal and interpersonal relationships are severely affected, often marked by mutual suspicion, hatred and resentment.

b. The emotional problems of the Convert who parts with his other wife or wives are often exacerbated by the occasional visits he is expected to make to the abandoned wife or wives in order to exercise his 'Christian love' towards them.

c. If there is still some degree of love between the man and the "sent-away" wife or wives, he may be tempted to commit 'adultery', while the Community acts as 'moral detective'.²⁴

3. The implications for the "sent-away" wife or wives are equally alarming.

a. Such women lose their social status in the Society and are often despised since they are no longer 'legitimate' wives.

23 Cf. M. D. W. Jeffreys "Polygyny in the Christian Fold," PRACTICAL ANTHROPOLOGY, 19 No.2 (March-April 1972), p.87.

24 Cf. Alan R. Tippet, "Polygamy as a Missionary Problem: The Anthropological Issues," PRACTICAL ANTHROPOLOGY, 17 No.2 (March-April 1970), p.77.

b. The denial of their legitimate conjugal rights leaves such women in a cruel state of affairs, either to decide to live as concubines or full-time prostitutes, or to remain as 'proselyte nuns'.²⁵

c. These 'abandoned' women are often denied the maternal relationship with their children if the customary law requires the children to remain with their father.

4. The children of such a separated family share the consequences of the dissolved marital union.

a. They are exposed to all kinds of moral corruption since they are deprived of the corporate love of their parents.

b. As 'orphans' while their parents are still alive, these children are tempted to hate either their father or their mother, depending on which of the parents is capable of attracting the children to his or her side.

c. Such children become more exposed to the danger of undernourishment.

d. They come under increased emotional and psychological crises as a result of the separation of their parents.

5. The effects of the Church's attitude upon a 'converted polygamist' who decides to remain with his wives are also considerable.

a. The Community's refusal to allow him to participate in the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper cuts him off from a vital source of spiritual strength and renewal. If such a believer cannot endure the isolation and 'spiritual undernourishment', the tendency is to search for alternative means outside the Church in order to satisfy his spiritual hunger and thirst.

25 Cf. Eugene Hillman, "Polygyny Reconsidered", CONCILIUM, 3 No.4 (March 1968), p.81.

b. He is easily exposed to the possibility of living a life of double standards.

c. Such a convert is subject to scornful remarks from the social group that he left behind in order to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

The foregoing examples of the consequences of the Church's attitude towards 'converted polygamists' are by no means exhaustive. However, these consequences help to point out the seriousness of the problem of 'converted polygamists' and their membership of the Church. It is the consideration of these effects rather than an unexamined sympathy for polygamists that prompts this study to call for a re-examination of the Church's attitude towards 'converted polygamists'.

The Church as a God-centered Community, as far as its conditions of membership are concerned, ought to remain faithful to Biblical witness and any ecclesiastical tradition on the matter that has a firm root in the teachings of the Holy Scripture. In doing so, the Community not only obeys its Lord but also helps in the expansion of God's Kingdom on Earth and in the upbuilding of those who are being saved. Any condition for membership of the local Church which goes beyond the response of faith in God through Jesus Christ amounts to putting an unnecessary yoke upon the convert.²⁶ It would appear that the Apostle Paul, in one of his letters to the Church at Corinth, sets out a general principle in dealing with problems of this nature. He declares:

26 Cf. Acts 15:10-11.

Only, let everyone lead the life which the Lord has assigned to him, and in which God has called him. This is my rule in all the Churches. Was any one at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was any one at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision. For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the Commandments of God. Everyone should remain in the state in which he was called. Were you a slave when called? Never mind. But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity. For he who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a slave of Christ. You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men. So, brethren, in whatever state each was called, there let him remain with God. 27

By implication of this Pauline injunction, the local Church ought to receive 'Converted Polygamists' into its membership without encouraging them to change their marital status. Their full participation in the life of the Church can further transform their whole family life. They, in turn, can enrich the Church's life with their own positive experiences in life. For, in spite of their polygamous background, these Converts can live for God's glory through faith in Christ and in the Power of the Holy Spirit.

III. THE COMMUNITY AND ITS WORSHIP OF GOD

The Church as a God-centered Community has God not only at the center of its worship but also at the beginning and at the end. This has to be so because God is the originator of worship and God alone deserves to be worshipped, and in worshipping God man fulfils the purpose of his own existence, namely to glorify God and to partake of God's love and peace. This type of worship goes beyond weekly worship on Sundays because it is a celebration of God's existence as God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. It pervades all dimensions of life. Therefore, the Community's worship as a celebration of God's existence is a private and a communal act of praising God, of drumming and dancing to his glory, of praying to God, of meditating upon God's words as contained in the Holy Scripture, of hearing God's voice, of remembering God's act of redemption, of preaching his Gospel, of giving tithes and offerings, of dedicating one's life to God as a living sacrifice, of rejoicing over God's love for man and the whole creation and of doing all things to God's glory - "in spirit and truth."¹ The believer's life or the Community's whole life, in this type of worship, becomes an all-the-time conscious response of gratitude to God because of who God is and for what he has done and continues to do for mankind in Jesus Christ.

The Community's worship is a celebration of God's existence. This celebration of God's existence is grounded on who God is according to the revelation of himself. It is also rooted on what he has done and

1 John 4:24 (R.S.V.).

continues to do for his world in Christ Jesus. What now follows is an attempt to expand the idea that the Community's worship is a celebration of God's existence. The pursuit of such a task here involves, firstly, a discussion of the basis for viewing the Community's worship as a celebration of God's existence, and secondly, an examination of some of the occasions for communal celebration of God's existence.

A. ITS WORSHIP IS A CELEBRATION OF GOD'S EXISTENCE

1. BECAUSE OF WHO GOD IS

The Community's worship is a celebration of God's existence because of who God is, according to the revelation of himself.² First and foremost, God is the Creator of all things that exist.³ By his own wisdom and authority, God brought into existence the Universe.⁴ As the sole originator of the Universe, God alone is worthy of the Community's worship. The hymn of the "twenty-four elders" in the Johannine vision expresses this truth: "'Worthy art thou, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for thou didst create all things, and by

2 The teachings of Holy Scripture provide the references for this part of the study because Chapter Two of this essay has already discussed selected African traditional notions of God and man. Furthermore, in outlining biblical notions of who God is, this study intends to limit itself to only three areas, namely, God as Creator, God as Sustainer and God as a Unique Being. A study of who God is can only be selective because God is beyond full description.

3 Genesis 1.

4 Cf. Psalms 8; Romans 11:33-36; I Corinthians 8:6.

thy will they existed and were created.""⁵

No other being is entitled to be adored because they are all creatures, owing their existence to God who created all things.

Secondly, not only is God the Creator of all things but God is also the sustainer of the things that exist.⁶ Nothing in all Creation escapes God's caring attention, as the Psalmist expresses in an exhortation to glorify God:

Sing to the LORD with thanksgiving;
make melody to our God upon the lyre!
He covers the heavens with clouds,
he prepares rain for the earth,
he makes grass grow upon the hills.
He gives to the beasts their food,
and to the young ravens which cry.
His delight is not in the strength of the horse,
nor his pleasure in the legs of a man;
but the LORD takes pleasure in those who fear him,
in those who hope in his steadfast love. 7

God sustains the heaven, the earth, mankind, birds of the air, beasts, all animate and inanimate things. He provides them with life and food, and he continually recreates them according to his purpose and design. "The LORD upholds all who are falling, and raises up all who are bowed down. The eyes of all look to thee, and thou givest them their food in due season. Thou openest thy hand, thou satisfiest the desire of every living thing."⁸

5 Revelation 4:11(R.S.V.).

6 Psalms 147:7-11; Hebrews 1:3.

7 Psalms 147:7-11 (R.S.V.).

8 Psalms 145:14-16 (R.S.V.). Cf. Psalms 36:5-12.

No one who is conscious of the sustaining love of such a Being can fail to adore him. The Church as a God-centered Community, in its celebration of God's existence, is motivated by this awareness of God's love in upholding the things that he has created.

In the third place, the Community celebrates God's existence because God is Unique. There is none like him in heaven and on earth.

'I am the first and I am the last;
besides me there is no god.
Who is like me? let him proclaim it,
let him declare and set it forth before me.
Who has announced from of old the things to come?
Let them tell us what is yet to be.
Fear not, nor be afraid;
have I not told you from of old and declared it?
And you are my witnesses!
Is there a God besides me?
There is no Rock; I know not any.'

9

As far as the Church is concerned, God alone is God, and even for that alone, God is Unique. God is the incomparable Supreme Being, the Lord of existence who transcends all other beings in power, majesty, wisdom, love, and in all possible noble attributes of life. In worship, the Community that owes its existence to this God cannot offer less than its whole life in the celebration of the existence of him who alone is pre-eminent. Like the Psalmist, the Community can always say:

"There is none like thee among the gods, O Lord,
nor are there any works like thine.
All the nations thou hast made shall come
and bow down before thee, O Lord,
and shall glorify thy name.
For thou art great and doest wondrous things,
thou alone art God."

10

9 Isaiah 44:6-8 (R.S.V.).

10 Psalms 86:8-10 (R.S.V.).

The Community's worship is a celebration of the existence of such a Unique God who alone is supremely perfect and before whom all men must continually confess their sins and their unworthiness. The Community's worship is a celebration of God's existence.

2. BECAUSE OF HIS REDEMPTIVE ACT

IN JESUS CHRIST

In the event in which God offered himself as Jesus of Nazareth for the redemption of mankind lies the central basis for the Community's celebration of God's existence. In order to appreciate the significance of God's redemptive action in Jesus Christ, it is helpful to recall briefly the plight of 'fallen' man.

When man rebelled against God by attempting to go it alone without the very Author and sustainer of his existence, the only God besides whom there is no other God, man plunged himself into a tragic state of life in which he could no longer fulfil the purpose for which God created him. The consequences of man's sin in rebelling against God are grave.

Firstly, in relation to God, the cordial and intimate relationship between God and man became marred.¹¹ Man could no longer fully partake of God's love and peace as God intended him to do when he created him. His sin alienated him from God and because of his estrangement from God, man's vision of the One true God degenerated to a level where man elevated other creatures to the status of gods. Man's worship of God became corrupted.¹² The glory which man is expected to give all to God, man

11 Genesis 3.

12 Cf. H. A. Hodges, THE PATTERN OF ATONEMENT, pp.14-24.

shared with graven images, with intermediaries which he erected to bridge the 'gap' between himself and God. In other cases, man claimed God's glory for himself as fellow human beings became tribal or national gods alongside the Supreme God.

Secondly, man's rejection of a life of right relationship with God has grave consequences for his life in relation to his fellow-men. Once his vision of the Source of his own life became perverted, the individual man could no longer recognize his neighbour. One's neighbour became defined either on the basis of self-centered interests or along the lines of class, tribal or ethnic considerations. As the vision of one God, one world and one humanity became increasingly corrupted with tribal or racial idolatry, families of the earth engaged one another in constant warfare. Cordial relationship of mutual trust with one's neighbour and mutual partnership in the pursuit of daily enterprises of life gave way, largely, to hatred, mutual suspicion and enslavement of one another.

By yielding to the temptation to make himself God, man ruined his own life.¹³ He lost the true vision of his own identity as a creature who belongs to God, and who is to live for God's glory and thereby rejoice in the fact of his own existence. Therefore, when man rejected God, he denied his own essential nature. He could not escape the consequences. He brought upon himself God's wrath and judgement. He received a just sentence of both physical and spiritual death. His spiritual

13 Cf. Ibid.

yearnings could no longer be satisfied because he denied God, the only Source of such satisfaction. The fear of physical death gripped man as 'the return to dust' became the experience of every living man. Once he had forsaken God there was no real hope for the future and the thought of facing an unknown future tormented man. In short, man, by rebelling against God, enslaved himself to his own ego, to sin, to death and to Satan who invited him to desert his Creator and Sustainer. Man destroyed his own life and stood clearly in need of a new life.¹⁴ He needed redemption from everything that has enslaved him and from everything that has made it impossible for him to glorify God in his life. Man needed deliverance from his state of spiritual loneliness to a reconciled life with God and with his fellow-men.

Man could never redeem himself out of his wretched state of life. God alone can liberate him from the bondage which his sin entrapped him in. God started that initiative to set man free through the call of Abraham. He created a people, Israel, an offspring of Abraham, and consecrated them not only for their own salvation but also for the working out of his redemptive purpose for the rest of mankind. But the God-centered Community which God founded through one of Abraham's descendants suffered defeat. That Community needed a resurrection, a new life and a recreation. Besides, God's purpose to bless other families of the earth needed to be accomplished. At God's own appointed time, God took the most extraordinary initiative to redeem man. He came in human flesh as Jesus of Nazareth, through an offspring of Abraham.¹⁵

14 Cf. Ibid.; Frank Stagg, NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY, pp.24ff.

15 Cf. Ibid., pp.25ff.

God incarnate, Christ Jesus, spent his life on earth ministering to the needs of people. He proclaimed the Good News of God's salvation, and healed the sick. But as the Lamb of God, it was on the Cross at Calvary that he finally offered his own life as the ransom for the redemption of mankind. The only Begotten Son of God died on the Cross, taking upon himself the penalty for the sins of mankind. God raised him up from the grave, proving his victory over sin and death.¹⁶

This extraordinary love-action in which God in Jesus Christ offered his life for the redemption of mankind stands at the heart of the Church's celebration of God's existence. When the Community recalls the implications of that unique event, its response should not be less than the offering of its own life for the glory of God. As a result of that action of God in Christ, reconciliation between God and man, and between man and his fellow-man, has become a reality.¹⁷ There is in Christ, for man, a restoration to life as it ought to be or as God intended it to be. It has become possible for man to glorify God again in his life if he chooses to follow the Son of God whose life, death and resurrection have ushered in a new era of a resurrected humanity. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him."¹⁸ Through faith in Christ Jesus, the repentant sinner has become a new man with a new life. "Therefore, if any man is in Christ, he is a new

16 Cf. Stagg, *op. cit.*, pp.35ff.

17 Cf. II Corinthians 5:19.

18 John 3:16-17 (R.S.V.).

creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come."¹⁹

Not only does God's saving act in Christ create a new man, but his action also recreates a Community of people from all tribes of the earth, a people consecrated to live for God's glory. This Community, a God-centered Community, has reason to celebrate God's existence. Not only has God made possible their reconciliation with him as their Lord but also, through his action, they are reconciled to each other. Furthermore, as a Community of people that are reconciled to God and to one another, they also have the privilege to participate in God's continuing work of reconciliation. "All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation,"²⁰ declares the Apostle Paul.

The Community which God recreated through the self-giving life of his Son, Jesus of Nazareth, is indwelt by the Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit, the Counsellor, whom the Son promised his disciples before his ascension into heaven, comes to dwell in the believer as God's further gift of himself. The new life is to be lived under the instructive influence and enabling power of the Holy Spirit.²¹

The Community's worship is a celebration of God's existence because of his redemptive act in Jesus Christ. If this view of worship is taken seriously, then a summary of some of the implications for the Church's worship of God is necessary at this point of the study.

19 II Corinthians 5:17 (R.S.V.).

20 II Corinthians 5:18 (R.S.V.).

21 Cf. John 14:15-26.

Firstly, this understanding of worship as a celebration of God's existence is opposed to the tendency to reduce worship to one day of the week, namely Sunday. Worship ought to be part and parcel of everyday life.

Secondly, worship as a celebration of God's existence as God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, avoids the tendency to reduce the Community's worship to one person of the Godhead. The Community's worship should always remain theocentric.

Thirdly, this view of worship stresses participation by all worshippers because it is a celebration. Communal or public celebration of God's existence ought not to be a monologue where the Pastor or the Priest does it all while those in the pew remain as passive observers.

Fourthly, if the Community celebrates God's existence because of who God is and because of his redemptive act in Jesus of Nazareth, then the celebration demands a response which involves the believer's or the Community's whole life. Everything that is good within the culture in which the believer lives or within the cultural environment within which the Church exists becomes a vehicle for celebrating God's existence. This implies that the imposition of a 'universal culture' which must be the only standard vehicle for celebrating God's existence can only hinder meaningful and intelligible celebration.

Fifthly, when members of the Community come together to celebrate God's existence, the characteristic note of the celebration ought to be jubilation. This has to be so because their celebration rests on who God is and on what he has done and continues to do in Jesus Christ. The Community's worship ought to be heavily marked with rejoicing and meditation.

Sixthly, since the Church's celebration of God's existence rests on who God is and on what he has done and continues to do in Christ for his creatures, the occasions for communal celebration of God's existence should not be confined only to the events that are directly connected with God's act of redemption in Jesus of Nazareth. The occasions ought to be as comprehensive as possible. Their comprehensiveness can hardly be detrimental to true worship, but on the contrary, their pervasiveness may help to promote God-consciousness in wider areas of life. Therefore, this essay suggests that, for the Church in Africa, the occasions for corporate celebration of God's existence can embrace such events as are associated with God's provision of the fruits of the earth and also those that are connected with the four cardinal points in man's life. Occasions for worship in African traditional religions, in spite of the pitfalls, cover wide areas of God's providential care and man's existence. Such a pervasive communal worship assisted in promoting cosmic God-consciousness and communal solidarity within the family, the village community or the tribe. God's redemptive work in Jesus of Nazareth in no way reduces the occasions for worship but makes possible the transformation of worship experience which covers all areas of life.

With these implications in the background, this study proceeds to expand further the suggestion that the Community's worship is a celebration of God's existence. The following discussion therefore focuses on some of the occasions for communal celebration of God's existence, with the aim of emphasizing God's act in creating such occasions. For to stress God's action in creating such events carries the implication that God's existence and not that of any other being is to be celebrated on such occasions.

B. CELEBRATION OF GOD'S EXISTENCE IN RELATION
TO GOD'S REDEPTIVE ACT IN JESUS CHRIST

1. CHRISTMAS

Christmas as a day which the Church has set apart for commemorating the birth of the Son of God is an occasion for communal celebration of God's existence. In a most miraculous act of redemption, God appeared in human flesh as God incarnate. He came as Jesus of Nazareth, the only Begotten Son of God, who was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. This advent of the Son of God in human flesh is God's act and it is a miracle.²² By this unsurpassed act of love, God opens a new chapter in his programme for bringing salvation to sinners. For the life of this Son of God, Jesus of Nazareth, is God's gift for the salvation of mankind.²³

This unique event is indeed an occasion for celebrating God's existence. For the incarnation is God's act and not that of any other being, either in heaven or on earth. The birth of the Son of God is the action of one God who is God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. From the mystery of his existence, God the Father sends into the world his Son in human flesh through a woman by the power of the Holy Spirit. This miraculous coming of God the Son into the world in a quite inconceivable

22 This study does not consider the debate on "the myth of God incarnate" as relevant for discussion here, particularly, on grounds that most of the Christians, if not all, in Nigeria, to whom this essay is primarily devoted, accept unquestionably the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ.

23 Cf. John 3:16; Galatians 4:4 1 John 4:9.

manner rightly deserves to be celebrated by the Community that owes its existence to that miracle of God's love.

Therefore, the celebration is first and foremost theocentric and not anthropocentric. For worship that is man-centered is idolatry and has nothing to do with the worship of God which is "in spirit and truth." The Community's worship on this occasion is a God-centered celebration in the name of and for the glory of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This trinitarian view of the celebration has to be so because the incarnation of the Son of God cannot be separated from the action of one God who reveals himself as God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, without losing its meaning and significance.

Furthermore, the Community's celebration of God's existence at Christmas has a distinctive mark of great rejoicing and meditation. The event which the Church commemorates at Christmas is not only an extraordinary event because of the miracle in which God takes upon himself human flesh but far more because that act of God in Jesus of Nazareth represents a decisive point in the salvation of mankind. The newly born child in Bethlehem is the Saviour of the world. This birth of a Saviour is the extraordinary good news which prompted "a multitude of the heavenly host" to burst into the praise of God saying: ""Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased.""²⁴ Just as the Angelic hosts worshipped God for this exceedingly great act of salvation, the men and women who owe their recreated lives to that miracle of God's love have every reason to jubilate on this occasion with thankfulness in their hearts to God.

24 Luke 2:14 (R.S.V.).

It follows that the expression of their joy on this occasion as part of their worship of God may take different forms depending especially upon their cultural situation. For the Church in Nigeria, and perhaps elsewhere in Africa, the celebration may include the following suggestions.

Firstly, the corporate worship of God or the Communal celebration of God's existence on this occasion may take place in the open air. This may be one way of proclaiming the birth of the Saviour of the world, the King of Kings whose authority is over the whole creation. A programme for an open air service on this occasion can include drumming and dancing to God's glory, singing and clapping of hands, preaching the Good News of God's Salvation in Christ, giving personal testimonies about God's saving grace and feasting. This may encourage active participation in the celebration by the celebrants and can contribute vitally to the raising of the emotional and spiritual tempo of the worshippers for effective encounter with God whom they seek to worship.

Secondly, the Church's worship of God on this occasion can embrace the idea of visiting and giving gifts to the needy. The opportunity to visit the Saviour that was born in Bethlehem, as the Shepherds did, and to offer him gifts like "the wise men from the East" is always present but in a different form. Any visit to the needy or the giving of gifts to the poor in the Saviour's name is in itself an act which is directed to the Lord himself. One of his teachings on the last judgement contains a statement which may be applicable here. He declares: "'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.'"²⁵ To worship God at Christmas through the act of giving to

25 Matthew 25:40 (R.S.V.).

the needy and visiting one's neighbour not only helps in the proclamation of the good news of the birth of a Saviour but may further assist in upholding the spirit of worship at Christmas which is the celebration of God's existence "in spirit and truth", the sharing in God's love and peace.

2. GOOD FRIDAY

Another occasion for the Church's corporate celebration of God's existence in relation to God's redemptive act in Jesus Christ is Good Friday - the day on which Jesus Christ was crucified on the Cross at Calvary.

Through this death on the Cross, God in Christ paid once and for all the penalty for the sins of mankind.²⁶ Man came under God's wrath and condemnation when he turned away from God and plunged himself into a life of sin and death. That rebellion ruined man's own life and marred his relationship with God and with his fellow-men. He stood clearly in need of pardon and forgiveness and in need of reconciliation with God and with his fellow-men. He was in need of a new life, a restoration to life as God intended it to be from Creation. This new life man himself could not bring about. He could not do so, not even through the offering of his own blood as a sacrifice or by shedding the blood of animals that he could lay his hands upon, because he is incapable of redeeming himself. In Jesus Christ, God acted. He offered the final solution to man's tragic plight. The Lamb of God gave his own life so that man can have a new life. This only Begotten Son of God "entered once for all into the Holy Place,

²⁶ Cf. Colossians 1:20.

taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption."²⁷ By offering his own life, Christ has made it possible for all those who acknowledge him as Saviour and Lord to have a new life. This gift of life is an act of God whose love for his world has resulted in the giving of his Son Jesus of Nazareth as the eternal price for a new creation.²⁸

It is against this background that the Church as a theocentric Community has to celebrate God's existence on the occasion of the death of the Son of God on the Cross. For that sacrifice of the Lamb of God has not only led to the recreation of their own lives and their being assembled together as a God-centered Community, but has also transformed their worship of God.

Firstly, their celebration of God's existence can no longer involve the shedding of animal blood or their own blood because Christ has offered his own perfect blood as the once and for all sacrifice for the remission of sins.

Secondly, the only sacrifice that is required of the Church in its worship of God is the offering of its entire life to the glory of God.²⁹ The giving of Christ's own life for their salvation demands that their response to God in worship can no longer be restricted to the offering of one aspect of their lives, no matter how vital that aspect of their life is; their response has to be full surrender of their whole life to God in everyday living.

27 Hebrews 9:12 (R.S.V.).

28 Cf. John 3:16; II Corinthians 5:17.

29 Cf. I Corinthians 10:31; II Corinthians 5:15.

Thirdly, the corporate celebration of God's existence on this day has to reflect both the joy and the sadness of the occasion. Their joy on this occasion is in consequence of the fact that Christ's death has resulted in their new life. Through his death, Christ offered salvation from sin and death. He brought eternal life to all those who trust in God through faith in him as their only mediator. This act of God's love in Christ urges all those who experience new life in Christ to rejoice as they worship God for the unspeakable gift. But it is also an occasion for Godly sorrow, for repentance, because that death of God's Messiah on the Cross is due to the sins of mankind. The Church's expression of remorse on this occasion may take the form of fasting. A self-denial of food and drink on this occasion may assist the worshipper to reflect seriously on the cost of his redemption and on the need continually to resist the temptation to live in sin.

With the above comments on Good Friday as an occasion for celebrating God's existence, the next event for consideration is Easter Sunday.

3. EASTER SUNDAY

Easter Sunday as a day on which God raised Jesus from the dead provides an occasion for the Church's celebration of God's existence. God's saving act in Jesus Christ does not end with the crucifixion on the Cross. His death is a death into life and leads to a new life for those who have faith in God through the risen Lord.³⁰ Therefore, as an essential part of his redemptive plan, God raised Jesus from the dead.

30 Cf. I Peter 1:3.

This resurrection of the Son of God from the grave confirms his victory over sin and death.

For the Church, the resurrection of Christ provides a decisive occasion for the celebration of God's existence. This is so because, in the first place, the resurrection is a proof of the victory over sin and death which God in Christ has won for all believers.³¹ Christ's resurrection is shared by those whose faith is in God through him.

In the second place, the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead guarantees new birth to all who believe in God through the risen Lord.³²

In the third place, Christ's resurrection brings a "living hope" to the believers. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead."³³ The resurrection has anchored the present and future hope of believers.

Lastly, the resurrection also assures the believers of the reality of Christ's continuing intercessory role on their behalf.³⁴ The resurrected Messiah is with the Father where he continues to mediate on behalf of those who call upon his name.

The Church's celebration of God's existence on Easter Sunday is therefore an appropriate response to God's supreme act of love for his creatures expressed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. If this is true, the com-

31 Cf. Colossians 3:1.

32 Cf. I Peter 1:3f.

33 I Peter 1:3. (R.S.V.)

34 Cf. Romans 8:34.

munal celebration of God's existence on the occasion of Christ's resurrection, either annually or weekly, may take different forms, provided that the worship is carried out "in spirit and truth." Each form will have to reflect the nature of the occasion and will have to bear the distinctive mark of any noble aspects of the culture of the celebrants if the celebration is to be meaningful and intelligible. This is not to deny the possibility of the positive influence of one culture upon another in the worship of God but recognises the fact that a form of worship which intends to respond to a people's spiritual yearnings cannot ignore their cultural milieu.

For example, in Nigeria, an annual Easter Day celebration of God's existence may take the form of an early morning thanksgiving service at the cemetery. The service can focus on singing the hymns that express the fact of Christ's resurrection and the resurrection of the dead in Christ. The service may include the reading of relevant passages of the Bible which speak of the victory over sin and death which God in Christ has won for all believers. A service of worship at the cemetery other than on the occasion of burying the dead can help to reduce or eliminate the fear of death and of the dead. After the service at the cemetery, the Church may hold a feast of thanksgiving where members bring their own food or arrange to cook together in a suitable place. Such a 'festal hour' may involve singing, dancing and dramatisation of some of the biblical accounts of the resurrection of Christ. It is necessary to reflect the joy of the occasion and to testify to the richness of God's grace which puts no limit to the variety of the Church's responsible response to the Lord of all.

The evening worship on Easter Sunday may be devoted to a service of Holy Communion in the Church building or any appropriate place. Such a time could bring the worshippers to meditate more on who God is and on what he has done and continues to do in Christ.

It is now time to consider the special coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost as another occasion for communal celebration of God's existence.

4. PENTECOST

God's special outpouring of his Spirit on the day of Pentecost provides one more occasion for corporate celebration of God's existence. Before his physical departure from this earth, Christ promised his disciples that he would request the Father to give them the Holy Spirit.³⁵ This promise was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost when God poured out his Spirit upon believers.³⁶ From then on, the gift of the Holy Spirit is for everyone who turns to God through faith in Jesus Christ.³⁷

The historic day of Pentecost, as the day on which God again offered himself as the empowering Spirit behind the individual believer and the Church as a whole, deserves to be set apart for corporate celebration of God's existence. Having paid the price for forgiveness and reconciliation on the Cross through the self-giving life of his only Begotten Son, Jesus of Nazareth, God has further given his Spirit to those who have faith in his Son. The need to celebrate God's existence on this historic

35 Cf. John 14:16.

36 Cf. Acts 2:1-4.

37 Cf. Acts 3:38-39.

occasion therefore rests on the following considerations.

Firstly, the gift of the Holy Spirit is a supreme act of love by God for undeserving creatures. There is nothing on the part of the Church or the world which merits this unsurpassed self-giving.

Secondly, by giving his Spirit to live in those who accept Jesus Christ as their Saviour, God has bridged the gap between himself and his children. He has made possible the intimate communion between himself and man which man's sin had disrupted and ruined. The presence of the Holy Spirit in the believer and in the Church has therefore put an end to their spiritual loneliness or isolation.

Thirdly, it is through this Spirit, the Holy Spirit, ~~that either the believer~~ or the Community can have strength to live to the glory of God. The Spirit is the power which enables believers to live and to worship.³⁸

Fourthly, the Holy Spirit, whose unique coming on the day of Pentecost is in accordance with the promise of God the Father to believers through the Son Jesus Christ, is "the Spirit of truth" who provides guidance to the Church.³⁹

Fifthly, the Holy Spirit helps to bring about the unity of believers.⁴⁰ Those who are led by the Spirit of God are drawn to one another for fellowship.⁴¹

Sixthly, the Holy Spirit gives spiritual gifts to believers for

38 Cf. Ephesians 3:16ff.; I Timothy 1:7; Romans 8:4, 26-27.

39 Cf. John 16:13.

40 Acts 2:43ff.

41 Ibid.

their common welfare.⁴²

Finally, the special giving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost means that "he will convince the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment"⁴³ in accordance with the promise of Jesus Christ to the disciples.

The call to celebrate God's existence on the occasion of the historic Pentecost rests on the above considerations. God's redemptive activity in Jesus Christ is perhaps summed up by that self-giving of God as the Holy Spirit through whom the Church continues to live. It is an unbelievable act of love because the Supreme Creator of man's life recreates that life, which man ruined, through the self-giving life of his only Begotten Son Jesus Christ and then enables that life to be lived through his Spirit. The occasion of that self-giving calls for a celebration, not a celebration of man's own existence but a celebration of God's existence as God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

But while the corporate celebration of God's existence on such a day may vary from one local Church to another, this essay would like to make one suggestion. There should be a deliberate plan to involve many members of the Church who are not regular officers of the Church to take charge of the worship service. This can encourage the use of varied talents within the Church and may also provide additional opportunity for the non-regular officers of the Church to develop their

42 I Corinthians 12:4, 7-11.

43 John 16:8 (R.S.V.).

Spirit-given abilities. This study now moves on to consider communal celebration of God's existence in relation to God's provision of the fruits of the earth.

C. CELEBRATION OF GOD'S EXISTENCE IN
RELATION TO GOD'S PROVISION OF THE FRUITS
OF THE EARTH

1. PLANTING-TIME

The occasion for planting new seeds is a time for the Church's corporate celebration of God's existence. This occasion in many African traditional societies is marked by prayers and sacrifices which are accompanied by elaborate ceremonies designed to seek the blessing of God and his intermediaries upon the seeds. For the Church in Africa, there is therefore an already existing context in which the idea of celebrating God's existence on the occasion of planting new seeds can flourish.

This being so, the basis of the celebration rests on the following considerations.

First, the seeds are part of God's gifts to mankind. "'Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food.'"⁴⁴

Second, the protection of the seeds ultimately rests upon God. His punishment can make the sowing of seeds to be in vain.⁴⁵

44 Genesis 1:29 (R.S.V.); Cf. Psalms 136:25.

45 Cf. Leviticus 26:16.

Third, God prospers the seeds to grow and to produce crops through the provision of rain, sunshine and the fertile soil - everything that the seeds need for fruitfulness.⁴⁶

To celebrate God's existence on this type of occasion is to offer to him the glory that he deserves. If this is the case, the communal worship of God on this occasion may involve the following suggestions.

In the first place, at the beginning of the major planting-time, a day could be set apart for the celebration.

In the second place, the Church service on that day could involve the bringing into the Church, for dedication to God's protective care and blessings, samples of the different seeds which are normally grown in that locality.

Thirdly and finally, there could be a procession of the congregation to a nearby farm for the symbolic planting of some seeds. Where it is not possible for the Church to make use of a nearby farm, a pot of rich soil could be provided for the symbolic planting to be performed. Before and after the seed or seeds are buried in the soil, prayers should be offered to God for his blessings upon the planting-time of that season or year. Such prayers of petition could include specific requests for rain and for the soil to be fertile. The reading of relevant passages of the Bible and the singing of appropriate hymns could be included in the programme. There is no need to offer sacrifices of blood on such an occasion because of the sufficiency and finality of the sacrifice of the Lamb of God on the Cross.

46 Cf. Psalms 104:14-16.

Not only may the Church's worship of God on this occasion be seen as a transformation of a valuable heritage but the worship experience itself can help to maintain the Community's God-consciousness in wider areas of life.

The next occasion for celebrating God's existence in relation to God's provision of the fruits of the earth is the harvest-time.

2. HARVEST-TIME

Harvest-time is another occasion for the Community's corporate worship of God. For many Churches, if not all, a harvest thanksgiving service already finds a place in their liturgical calendar. The Church in Africa in its annual harvest thanksgiving service finds a receptive soil in African tradition, in the sense that harvest-time thanksgiving ceremonies are widespread in African traditional religions.

The call to celebrate God's existence on this occasion rests on three considerations.

Firstly, God is the giver of the harvest. There can be no harvest without the blessing of God.⁴⁷

Secondly, man's ability to make use of the harvested crops ultimately rests on God's mercy. He is the giver of life.⁴⁸

Thirdly, there is also the need to respond to such a gift. The Church's appropriate response can hardly be less than the worship of God on such an occasion.

It follows then that harvest-time is an occasion for celebrating

47 Cf. Psalms 65:9-13; 67:6-7.

48 Cf. Psalms 104:27-30.

God's existence. It is a time for giving thanks to God as well as for great jubilation in respect of God's provision. If so, the communal celebration of God's existence on this occasion could incorporate the following suggestions.

First, the Church could hold a communal feast and invite the poor and the needy in the neighbourhood to share the fruit of God's provision. Such an act of worship will reflect the Church's solidarity with the poor on behalf of the Lord of all.

Second, in recognition of the Lord's presence at the feast, the opening prayer should include, in addition to the expression of gratitude, a specific invitation to the Lord of the harvest to have the first share of the meal and to bless what he has graciously provided.

There is another area of the Church's corporate celebration of God's existence which this essay now examines.

D. CELEBRATION OF GOD'S EXISTENCE IN RELATION TO THE FOUR CARDINAL EVENTS OF MAN'S LIFE

1. BIRTH

The birth of a child provides a vital occasion for the Church's corporate celebration of God's existence.

In the first place, such a celebration is a recognition of the fact that the child is a gift from God. All life comes from God alone and the Church expresses its collective gratitude to God when it corporately worships God on the occasion of the birth of a child.

In the second place, the celebration of God's existence on this occasion is an acknowledgement of the fact that the child is ultimately under God's protection and care as it grows towards maturity. It is the Church's dedication of the child to God to work out his purpose for the child's life.

In the third place, the communal worship of God on this occasion is the Community's grateful acknowledgement that the child is one of them. It comes from the same ultimate source - from God - and is "in the image of God."⁴⁹ The child is therefore related to God, to the whole human race, to the Church and to the immediate parents. In its celebration of God's existence on the occasion of the birth of a child, the Church as a theocentric Community expresses this sense of belonging.

In the fourth place, the Church's corporate worship of God on this occasion is a pledge of acceptance of collective responsibility for the child on behalf of God.

Finally, the Church in its worship of God in relation to the birth of a child rejoices over the gift which God has given. The birth of a child causes the Church to rejoice but it is a rejoicing which is God-centered and not man-centered. It is an occasion of jubilant celebration of God's existence.

These considerations underscore the need for the Church, particularly in Nigeria, to pay more attention to corporate worship of God in relation to the occasion of the birth of a child. At present in many Churches within Nigeria, worship services in relation to the occasion of the birth of a child, either in the form of a naming ceremony or in the form of a child-dedication ceremony, appear to be nothing more than an appendix to the main worship service on Sundays. It may be necessary, as the local

49 Genesis 1:27 (R.S.V.).

Church situation permits, to set apart morning or evening worship on one Sunday a month for the celebration of God's existence in relation to the birth of a child or of children within the Church. The service may include, among other acts of worship, the calling of the name or names of the child, or of the children, after the Minister or Pastor has called each name as a pledge of support and identification with the particular child in question. It may be necessary also to use this occasion to pray for expectant mothers in the Church for the safe delivery of their babies. The service may include prayers for the barren women for God's blessings. Where the local Church approves the ministry of laying on hands, the Pastor or the Minister and the Elders or the Deacons may lay hands on such women while all the other worshippers join them on their knees for the prayer of petition on behalf of these women.

The next occasion for communal celebration of God's existence in relation to the four cardinal events of man's life is Puberty.

2. PUBERTY

Puberty as "the great transition between childhood and physical maturity"⁵⁰ is a unique occasion for the Church's corporate worship of God. In African traditional religions, puberty rites, like other rites of passage, occupy a major place in the religious acts of the people. The transition from childhood to adulthood is considered to be of crucial importance for the individual as well as for the society of which the individual is inseparably a member. The way in which the individual lives

50 E. Geoffrey Parrinder, AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION (Third Edition), p.94. Cf. Osadolor Imasogie, Mimeographed lecture notes on "Thematic Features in African Traditional Religion," p.7.

is believed to affect the chains of relationships to which the individual is linked - parents, relations both living and 'living-dead', neighbours and the spiritual realities that are believed to have influence on a man's life. Consequently, great attention is paid to puberty rites which are aimed at ensuring not only the smooth and effective transition from childhood to adulthood but also the establishment of a sound mental, ethical and spiritual basis for active participation in the adult life of the community.

While the Church in Nigeria or elsewhere in Africa should not return to the details of traditional African ways and means of facing this critical moment in life, the Church ought to make a positive response to this turning-point in life which has profound implication for the well-being of the individual and his community. Therefore, for this essay, one way of transforming the observance of this rite of passage, like other rites of passage, is for the Church as a theocentric Community corporately to celebrate God's existence on the occasion.

The celebration would mean, first of all, a corporate act of praising God for his mercy in sustaining the young people who are entering the adult stage in life. The development from one stage in life to another is a God-given privilege and the response of those who appreciate that gift can hardly be less than a thankful offering of praise to God.

Secondly, the celebration is a communal act of dedication and consecration of the young adults to God as they enter the adult life.

Thirdly, the Community's celebration of God's existence on this occasion is a collective declaration of loyalty to God and a corporate pledge to accept one's role in the Church and within Society.

Finally, the celebration is a communal act of singing and dancing, jubilation and feasting to the glory of God, for granting the young people the opportunity to reach that stage in life.

Having suggested that the occasion of the puberty rite affords the Church a vital opportunity for corporate celebration of God's existence, this study wishes to call for an introduction of a "puberty week"⁵¹ into the liturgical calendar of the Church, particularly in Nigeria and in other parts of Africa where such a practice could mean for the Christian converts a transformation of the traditional puberty rites. During such a week, the local Church should arrange a special training programme for all the young people who are entering the adult stage in life. Instruction on the Christian life, sex, marriage, law and order, respect for societal values, finding a vocation in life, the art of corporate living, and on various aspects of life should be given to the young by the Church. There is no suggestion here that only the Pastor of the local Church should teach the class. As many exemplary elderly men and women as possible who are in the fellowship could be asked to take part in the programme of instruction. Of course, the choice of the most suitable time of day for the classes rests with the local Church.

Furthermore, if it is possible, the young people in that category should be separated from their parents throughout that week, or at least during the weekend of "puberty week", and should be gathered together in a quieter environment where they can collectively meditate over their new status in life.

51 One week in every quarter of the year may be designated as "puberty week", or as the situation of the local Church dictates.

The programme for the young during "puberty week" should come to its climax on the Sunday when the young adults are to be received by the whole congregation. Each local Church will decide how best to plan its programme of corporate worship of God that Sunday. However, the following suggestions are here put forward for consideration.

First, each initiate should be given the opportunity to pledge loyalty to God, to the ideals of the Society and to the Church. The Pastor and the parents of the young adult should assist the young person to formulate the words of the pledge well in advance.

Second, the congregation should respond to the pledge by declaring their support for the young adults.

Third, the Pastor and other members of the congregation may lead the whole assembly in praying specifically for the initiates. During the prayers, those young adults should kneel before the assembly as a symbol of their submission to God's rule in their lives.

Fourth, as a token of the Church's continuing love for these young adults, the Church may give each of them a copy of the Bible or an appropriate text of Holy Scripture printed or neatly hand-written in the form of a certificate.

Fifth, at the close of the service, there should be an opportunity for the congregation to shake hands with each of the initiates as a mark of friendship and of communal solidarity.

Finally, the Church may arrange a small reception party where all the members can further rejoice with the young adults.

The next stage in man's life which provides the occasion for the Community's corporate celebration of God's existence is marriage.

3. MARRIAGE

The communal celebration of God's existence by the Church in relation to the occasion of marriage rests on the following considerations.

First of all, the celebration is a response to the fact that the establishment of marriage is an act of God.⁵² He ordained marriage from the beginning of creation for a relationship of companionship and love between man and woman, and for the increase of the human species.⁵³

Secondly, the celebration is an acknowledgement of the fact that God alone provides the ultimate foundation for successful married life. He is the eternal love to whom partners in marriage can always turn for the renewal and for the deepening of their love for each other.

If the above points are taken seriously, then the Church's corporate celebration of God's existence on the occasion of marriage is, first and foremost, an offering of thanksgiving to God for all the benefits of marriage. God deserves to receive all the praise and the glory that are due to his name on such a great occasion, one which he has established for the benefit of mankind.

Secondly, the celebration involves the communal act of entrusting into God's care the bride and the bridegroom, their families and friends. The Community does this in order to ensure the outpouring of his blessings upon the persons whom he has joined together in marriage.

52 Cf. Genesis 1:27, 28; 2:18. 24.

53 Ibid.

Thirdly, the celebration of God's existence on this occasion is a corporate act of festivity and rejoicing in God's name for the union of two persons and for the solidarity of their families in the common pursuit of a life-pilgrimage of self-giving love. On the occasion of this great event in man's life, the Church as a theocentric Community rejoices in God for God's enrichment of the human life through the event of marriage.

The above view on marriage as an occasion for the Church's corporate celebration of God's existence has at least one practical implication for a Church wedding. It implies that the religious significance of marriage should always override any consideration of the material dimension. This has to be so because when the emphasis rests heavily on very expensive clothes and a large-scale reception involving much food and drink, a Church wedding becomes an expensive luxury which can only be enjoyed by the rich in the Church. Hastings is right in his observation that an expensive Church wedding "is undoubtedly a reason why marriage in Church is often delayed for years or even avoided altogether."⁵⁴ This tendency to delay or to avoid a Church wedding can be reduced or even eliminated when the occasion is seen primarily as a time for the worship of God.

The next and the last occasion in relation to the four cardinal events in man's life which is seen here as an occasion for the Church's communal celebration of God's existence is death.

54 Adrian Hastings, CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE IN AFRICA: BEING A REPORT COMMISSIONED BY THE ARCHBISHOPS OF CAPE TOWN, CENTRAL AFRICA, KENYA, TANZANIA, AND UGANDA, p.110.

4. DEATH

The need for the Church to celebrate God's existence when death occurs in an individual's life, especially on the occasion of the death of a believer, rests on one fundamental consideration, namely that the death of a believer is a passage into the eternal home which God has prepared for those who have accepted his gift of salvation.⁵⁵ The believer's death is a transition into the eternal fullness of life.

Therefore, for the Church as a theocentric Community, there can only be one true response to God on the occasion of the death of a believer, namely to worship God. That is, to celebrate God's existence as God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This celebration involves, first of all, a corporate act of praising God who not only is the giver of life but also transforms it at death. God alone deserves the glory and the honour of the occasion and not man. It is therefore inappropriate for the Church to eulogise the deceased.

Secondly, the celebration involves a communal act of interceding for the deceased and his relations. The Church prays for the deceased to partake of God's peace and love in accordance with God's promise to the saved. Corporately, the Church also brings before God those who at that particular occasion stand in need of God's comfort, and of reassurance of his protection and care.

Thirdly, the celebration entails the Church's corporate reflection upon its God-given life and upon what it has done with the time which God has allotted to it. In doing so, the Church also commits itself afresh

55 Cf. I Corinthians 15.

to God so that God will continue to work out his purpose for the Church and for its individual members.

Finally, the celebration involves a communal expression of joy and sorrow. The worshippers on this occasion rejoice because the departed member has gone to be with the Lord of the Community. At the same time, they express their sorrow because the temporary separation is a vital loss of fellowship on the physical plane.

IV THE COMMUNITY AND ITS GROWTH

The Church as a theocentric Community is under obligation to grow both quantitatively and qualitatively. It has to expand numerically because it is God's will to accept into the Community whoever repents and trusts in his only Son Jesus Christ.¹ The Church is open to all who are willing to accept God's gift of salvation which he has offered through the self-giving life of Christ Jesus. The Church has to increase in number in response to the Lord of the Community's command to "make disciples of all nations."² At the same time those who have appropriated that gift of salvation ought not to remain the same as they were before their conversion. They are to grow to be like him who is their Master and Lord.

The Community, therefore, is to grow both quantitatively and qualitatively. It has to increase in number as well as grow towards Christlikeness. This growth it cannot achieve on its own, but only through its response to God who is the ultimate Source of its growth.

The discussion that now follows focuses on some of the ways in which the Church can respond to God in order to grow both spiritually and numerically.

A. OPENNESS TO THE SPIRIT OF GOD

If the Church is to grow qualitatively and numerically, it has to be open to the leadership of the Spirit of God. God has given his Spirit

1 Cf. John 3:16.

2 Matthew 28:16 (R.S.V.).

to be the enabling power within the Church and as the Spirit of guidance.³ As it strives to fulfil the purpose for which it is created, the Church as a theocentric Community has to remain open to the life-giving Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit. This openness, in the first place, involves a conscious awareness of the presence of the Holy Spirit at all times and in every place, ready to enable the Church or the believer to live out God's purpose in every given situation. The Church is to be in a mood of expectation that the Spirit of God is always ready to illuminate, to guide, to instruct, to empower, to comfort, to renew, to reconcile, to unite, to enable worship, to set free, to send and to assist the recreated persons to live the new life in Christ in all circumstances to the glory of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Secondly, this openness to the Spirit of God implies obedience to whatever the Spirit says. When the will of God is disclosed through his indwelling Spirit, the required response is absolute obedience. In his own life in the human flesh, Jesus of Nazareth gave the ultimate example of an unreserved obedience to God's will.⁴ He remained "obedient unto death, even death on a cross."⁵ The early disciples followed his example and demonstrated their utter obedience to the leadership of the Spirit of God even when they were confronted with the choice of imprisonment or of physical death.⁶ In consequence of their obedience, they increased in

3 Cf. John 16:13; Acts 1:8.

4 Cf. Donald Guthrie, NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY, pp.154-155.

5 Philippians 2:8 (R.S.V.).

6 Acts 4:18ff.; 5:17ff.

number and grew spiritually. In the same way, if the Church today is to grow numerically and spiritually, it cannot ignore its obedience to the Holy Spirit.

Thirdly, openness to the Holy Spirit consists of believing that the Holy Spirit is capable of working miracles through the Church or through an individual believer today. The miraculous power of the Holy Spirit which is at work in the world at large and in the Church and through the Church is not restricted to any particular age or time. The Spirit is at work today. What is required by the Church or the individual in the Church in order to be enriched by the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit is trust in the ability of the Spirit to perform its miracle in any given situation today in accordance with God's will.

Fourthly, the Church's openness to the Spirit of God involves utter dependence upon the Spirit. It is not only necessary for the Church to believe that the Holy Spirit works miracles today but it is indispensable for the Church to have a childlike sense of dependence upon the limitless power and resources of the Holy Spirit.

Finally, openness to the Spirit of God involves the Community's sensitivity to the creativity of the Holy Spirit and to its ability to communicate its message to the Church or to the individual believer in many ways. The Spirit of God is not tied down to one particular method of disclosing the mind of God. The Spirit can communicate through dreams, visions, pain or suffering, written or spoken words, people, animals or whatever vehicle the Spirit chooses to disclose the will of Christ in a particular situation. The Church's response to the many-sided communication strategies of the Spirit of God is sensitivity.

The Church as a God-centered Community grows through its openness to the leadership of the Holy Spirit. It also grows through its devotion to prayer.

B. DEVOTION TO PRAYER

Prayer is an act of worship which embraces adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication, communion and commitment.⁷ In prayer, the believer turns to God both for his 'daily bread' and to give glory to God. This type of response to God is made possible by God himself. For he first made man in his own image, and by so doing he established a vital means of communication between himself and man. Furthermore, in Jesus Christ, God not only made possible the redemption of man but he also gave the Holy Spirit to all who have appropriated his salvation in Christ. God is therefore the enabler of prayer. He provides this unique means of communication with himself in order to enrich the lives of his creatures and for these creatures to give him the glory that is due to his name as the sole author, redeemer and sustainer of their lives.

In order to grow both qualitatively and numerically, the Church not only makes use of this privilege to pray but as a God-centered community it has to devote itself to prayer. What this devotion to prayer implies is now considered.

First, the Church's devotion to prayer implies praying always. The only true God to whom the Church prays is always ready to receive the worship of the Church and to respond to its petitions.⁸ He is

7 Cf. Frank Stagg, NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY, pp.279ff.

8 Cf. Jeremiah 33:3; Psalms 50:15; 65:2; Luke 18:1-8.

never too occupied to have time for his creatures nor limited in the resources that are available to him. Besides, if prayer is an act of worship, the Church ought to pray all the time. It has also to devote its life to prayer continually because in prayer the Church praises God, gives thanks to him, confesses its sin, intercedes for unbelievers, asks for its own needs, communes with God and commits its own life to him. The Church grows through the experience of devoting its life to God in prayer.

Second, devotion to prayer involves taking everything to God in prayer. The Church as a theocentric Community is to give thanks to God in everything, as the Scripture says, "pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."⁹ The Church grows through its unceasing appreciation of the love of God who made possible the recreation of the life which he himself gave and whose Spirit is at work in the world and in the Church. The Community not only praises God in all circumstances, but it is to bring to God all its requests in the name of the Saviour who declares: "If you ask anything in my name, I will do it."¹⁰ As the Community prays in every circumstance, its life is constantly revived and its vision of God and of its own life, as well as its vision of its responsibility to the world on behalf of its Lord, is renewed and revitalized. This is so because in prayer the Community enters into the inner chamber of its Lord who is the source of life, wisdom, understanding and power. The Church grows through the dynamic experience of taking everything to God in prayer.

9 I Thessalonians 5:17-18 (R.S.V.).

10 John 14:14 (R.S.V.).

Third, the Community's devotion to prayer implies praying without doubting the love of God and his ability to respond to the prayers that are made to him. "'And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith.'"¹¹ The words of Christ cited here encourage the Church to trust in God as it prays. The Church's own life is affected positively as it exercises absolute confidence in God in its prayers. This complete trust in God promotes a sense of utter dependence upon God and that in turn creates a healthy atmosphere for the Spirit of God to continue to work out God's purpose for the Church's life and vocation.

Fourth, devotion to prayer in the life of the Church involves praying with sincerity and understanding. In one of his teachings about prayer, Christ advances this truth: "'And in praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.'"¹² If the Church is to grow through its devotion to prayer, then its prayer cannot be a presentation of "empty phrases" or vague generalisations but a sincere and a concrete communication with God.

Finally, the Community's devotion to prayer implies consecration in prayer. It involves abstention from anything that is likely to be a source of distraction to prayer. At times, this may require husband and wife to deny each other their rightful conjugal rights upon their

11 Matthew 21:22 (R.S.V.); Cf. Matthew 7:7ff.

12 Matthew 6:7-8 (R.S.V.).

mutual agreement to do so.¹³ Consecration in prayer may also involve abstention from food.

Another area of the Community's response to God in order to grow both qualitatively and quantitatively is devotional study of the Bible.

C. DEVOTIONAL STUDY OF THE BIBLE

To enable the Church to continue to grow, the devotional study of the Bible is not optional but imperative. This is because the Bible is "inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work."¹⁴ As such, the Bible has to be studied devotionally and not to be read like an ordinary religious text-book.

This devotional study of the Bible involves, first of all, willingness to accept the implications for the Church's life of whatever the Spirit of God discloses through the Word of God. In its study of the Holy Scripture, the Church has to open its heart, mind and soul to God in order to hear and to obey what God has to say to it through the Scriptures. That willingness of heart provides a receptive atmosphere for the Holy Spirit to instruct the mind with God's message as contained in the Bible.

Secondly, the Community's devotional study of the Bible involves regular meditation upon the Word of God. As far as the Church is concerned, the Bible is not an ordinary reference book which is to be

13 Cf. I Corinthians 7:5.

14 II Timothy 3:16 (R.S.V.).

consulted only when there is a dire need to do so, but the Word of God which the Church as a theocentric Community has to meditate upon constantly. If the devotional study of the Bible occupies its rightful place in the Church's life, the Church is bound to grow.

Next, the Community also grows when it devotes its life to the worship of God.

D. DEVOTION TO THE WORSHIP OF GOD

The Church as a God-centered Community can never remain the same if it devotes its life to the worship of God. For in its worship of God, the Church enters into a unique and a living relationship with the Lord of its existence. Through such an encounter, the Church's life is revived and enriched by the Holy Spirit.¹⁵ The Church's vision of God and of the world and of its own life becomes clearer because of the experience of meeting with the Lord of life through the celebration of God's existence. A genuine worship encounter with God never fails to revive the life of the worshipper. For instance, Isaiah's worship experience in the temple after the death of King Uzziah resulted in the renewal of the prophet's life.¹⁶ The prophet had his guilt removed, his sin forgiven and his hope restored.¹⁷ Through the worship experience, Isaiah became more conscious of his humanity and of God's holiness. Besides, he was able to respond positively to the call to be God's messenger.¹⁸

15 Cf. David Watson, DISCIPLESHIP, pp.105f.

16 Isaiah 6:1-8.

17 Ibid.

18 Isaiah 6:8.

If the above example reinforces the belief that a true worship encounter with God produces a positive change in the worshipper's life, then the next task is to outline what devotion to the worship of God involves in the life of the Church.

Firstly, devotion to the worship of God involves a wholehearted response to God. If the Church's celebration of God's existence is to have any positive effect upon the Church's life, its worship must be carried out with all sincerity of heart.¹⁹ Insofar as the Church remains conscious of the fact that God alone deserves to be worshipped, the Church's devotion to the worship of God should always be characterized by unreserved response to God. There ought to be no place for pretence in the Church's worship of God if such an encounter is to glorify God and upbuild the Church.

Secondly, the Community's devotion to the worship of God involves worship as part and parcel of everyday life. "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."²⁰ A similar point was made to the Church at Colossae. "And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him."²¹ The dedication of every area of life to the celebration of God's existence not only expresses a sense of gratitude to God for his abundant grace but also enables the worshipper to mature in life.

19 James Montgomery Boice, THE GOSPEL OF JOHN: AN EXPOSITIONAL COMMENTARY VOLUME 1 John 1:1-4: 54, p.368.

20 I Corinthians 10:31 (R.S.V.).

21 Colossians 3:17 (R.S.V.).

Finally, the Community's devotion to the worship of God involves faithful participation in the corporate celebration of God's existence. The Spirit of God expands the Community and nourishes the lives of its members as they corporately devote their lives to collective worship of God. This is particularly true of the first century disciples of Christ in Jerusalem as the writer of the Acts of the Apostles testified. "And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved."²² Through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit, the worshippers strengthen one another's faith in such a worship experience.

The Church as a theocentric Community grows through its response to the means which God has provided for its ongoing life. The last of such responses to be considered here is the believers' sharing of their lives with each other.

E. SHARING ONE'S LIFE WITH OTHERS

In consequence of God's redemptive act in Jesus Christ, the sharing of one's life with others has once more become a reality for all those who have appropriated that gift of God's love. The conversion experience which results from a positive response to God's work of salvation through Christ unites the convert with the Lord of life and with other members of the theocentric Community.²³ The person who is

22 Acts 2:46-47 (R.S.V.).

23 Cf. Galatians 3:26-28.

thus reconciled to God and to his fellow-men is required to live the new life in the company of other believers.²⁴ The call to faith in God through Christ is a call to a life of communion with him as the Lord of life and to a life of intense fellowship of mutual love. This living together the life of faith in God through Christ by Christians has become a vital means of their growth as they are led by the Holy Spirit to share the gifts of life which God has bestowed upon them for their mutual upbuilding. If this is so, the main task at this point is to indicate what the sharing of one's life with others involves in the common life of the members of the theocentric Community.

Firstly, it involves acceptance of one another. It is difficult, if not impossible, to share one's life with others in a communal life-style if there is no mutual acceptance of each other's worth. Genuine fellowship takes place within an atmosphere of mutual acceptance of all the parties involved in the art of living together. This acceptance should never be based on one's social status or on any other man-made conditions.²⁵ The believers' acceptance of each other is in line with what God himself has done by accepting in his mercy each of them through his Son Jesus Christ.²⁶ In accepting each other against the background of what God has done for them in Jesus Christ, believers are able to share with one another the opportunities and experiences of their lives for the benefit of their mutual growth.

Secondly, the believers' sharing of their lives with each other involves bearing each other's burdens. In one of his exhortations to

24 Cf. Bruce Milne, WE BELONG TOGETHER, p.61f.

25 Cf. Stagg, op. cit., p. 201.

26 Cf. II Corinthians 5:18; Ephesians 1:3ff.

the Church in Galatia, the Apostle Paul declares: "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ."²⁷ Each member of the Church needs the other members in order to fulfil the purpose of his or her calling in Christ. Their life together is a community life based on self-giving love in which they have to assist each other, strengthen each other and encourage each other. Furthermore, it appears that one of the implications of the fact that God has given different gifts to the members of the Community is to underline their need of each other as they attempt to live their recreated lives to the glory of God.²⁸ The Church grows when the members mutually support each other in their common life in Christ.²⁹

Finally, the sharing of one's life with others, particularly within the common life of the Church of God, involves loving one another. In a sense this aspect of the sharing of one's life with others sums up all other demands for living together within the theocentric Community. Boice is correct when he says that the demand to love one another "includes everything else that can be mentioned"³⁰ in relation to what the fellowship of believers should involve.³¹ This love for one another is a new law which Jesus Christ gave to his disciples. "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another."³²

27 Galatians 6:2 (R.S.V.).

28 Cf. I Corinthians 12-14.

29 Cf. Milne, *op. cit.*, pp.74ff.

30 James Montgomery Boice, GOD AND HISTORY, p.169.

31 Ibid.

32 John 13:34 (R.S.V.).

When members of the theocentric Community love one another, they forgive each other, encourage each other, rebuke each other, help each other, instruct each other and guide each other. In short, they do for each other whatever they could do to enrich each other's life both spiritually and materially. They become engaged in a theocentric brotherhood as each other's keeper in the pursuit of one common goal in life - the glorification of God's name. Under this theocentric koinonia, members of the Church can grow intensively and extensively through the enabling power of God.

V. THE COMMUNITY AND ITS RESPONSIBILITY

The idea of regarding the Church as a theocentric Community has far-reaching implications for the nature of the Church's responsibility and for the way the Church pursues that task.

First and foremost the Church's responsibility is to be viewed in a theocentric perspective. The Church's responsibility is not a man-centered onus but a God-centered responsibility. For the Community's task is given by God and it is to be accomplished in the power of God and for the glory of God. "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory for ever."¹

Secondly, the Community's responsibility is comprehensive. It embraces all areas of life, as there is no limit to what God will lead the Community to do in his name and through his enabling Spirit, both for his glory as well as for the benefit of all his creatures. The Church as a God-centered Community is called to be an instrument of God's love in action for all his creatures. And since the application of this love is to cover every genuine need of God's creatures, the scope of the Church's responsibility is all-embracing. By implication, any debate as to whether the Church has social, political or economic responsibility is at best irrelevant. Furthermore, the comprehensive nature of the Church's responsibility implies that while there are universal issues which the Church everywhere will have to face, there are at the same time other issues of life which are peculiar to a given locality where the

1 Romans 11:36 (R.S.V.); cf. R. B. Kuiper, GOD-CENTRED EVANGELISM: A PRESENTATION OF THE SCRIPTURAL THEOLOGY OF EVANGELISM, pp.8-9.

Church exists. In other words, the Church's responsibility has both universal and particular dimensions.

Thirdly, if the Community's responsibility is a God-centered responsibility because the Church is a theocentric Community, then every member of the Community is to be involved in the execution of the God-given task.² For the call to faith in God through Christ in the Spirit is a call to be an ambassador for God.³ The call to be involved in God's ministry for his world requires the participation of everyone who has answered that call. The level of individual participation in the execution of this God-given responsibility may vary from one individual to another but each one has a part to play.

Fourthly, as a God-centered Community, the primary incentive for the Church's discharge of its responsibility is love for God and love for one's neighbour. The Community does not pursue its task solely to obtain a reward, but it undertakes its responsibility in a spirit of love for God who has made its existence possible and for the benefit of all God's creatures. This does not mean that a labourer does not deserve his wages but it is to emphasize the fact that the Church, first and foremost, in its pursuance of its responsibility has love for God and love for its neighbour as the main incentive.

Finally, the accomplishment of the Church's theocentric responsibility is through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit.⁴ God has not left the

2 Cf. I Peter 2:9ff.

3 Cf. II Corinthians 5:20.

4 Cf. John 16:13; Romans 15:18ff.; Jürgen Moltmann, THE CHURCH IN THE POWER OF THE SPIRIT: A CONTRIBUTION TO MESSIANIC ECCLESIOLOGY, pp.289ff.

Church alone to face its responsibility in its own power and wisdom but has given his Spirit to the Church to offer both leadership and power. On its own, the Church can easily go astray amid the complexity and comprehensiveness of its task. It can easily run out of ideas and may not get its priorities right when it faces its God-given responsibility in its own strength and insight. However, God has not left the Church alone but has given his Spirit to lead and to empower the Church to pursue its theocentric responsibility.

With the above points in mind, this study proceeds to discuss the Church's responsibility in contemporary Africa, or more specifically in contemporary Nigeria. In fact, the central question that this section of the study intends to answer is: what type of responsibility exists for the Church in contemporary Nigeria? The answer to this question may prove relevant to the Church in other parts of Africa or elsewhere in the world, but it is Nigeria as a nation which remains as the immediate target audience of the following discussion on the Church's responsibility. It remains to be said also that there is no suggestion in this study that it is possible to cover all aspects of the Church's task in Nigeria. The complexity of the Nigerian situation together with the comprehensive nature of the Church's responsibility even within that nation alone defies an exhaustive treatment by one student. Therefore, what follows now is a brief discussion of the Church's theocentric responsibility for contemporary Nigeria along four interrelated aspects of human life. These are the spiritual, the political, the social and the economic.

A. ITS SPIRITUAL RESPONSIBILITY

First, the Church in Nigeria has a God-given responsibility to pray for Nigeria. By virtue of its own experience of God's salvation, the Church is in a unique position to intercede before God for the people of Nigeria. The Church has become a priestly Community to God through its appropriation of God's saving Grace in Christ and in the Holy Spirit.⁵ It exercises this priestly function by bringing to God the praises and the needs of the Nigerian people. The execution of this task should not only be restricted to times of national distress but should be part of the Church's daily ministry and should involve every member of the Church. As the Church in Nigeria exercises its spiritual responsibility by praying for Nigeria, it identifies itself with God in his concern for the welfare of his creatures. At the same time, the Church expresses its solidarity with the people it has to live with and in whose midst it has to function.

The Church's second spiritual responsibility in Nigeria is to bear witness to God's act of redemption in Jesus Christ. The Gospel is to be proclaimed to the people of Nigeria to bring them to repentance and to faith in God through Jesus Christ for their salvation. The Church should never abandon this task as long as there is a need for it. For it has the divine mandate to testify to God's redemptive act in Christ and in the Holy Spirit.⁶ Further, for the sake of its love for God and for God's people in Nigeria, its responsibility of proclaiming the

5 Cf. I Peter 2:9; Revelation 1:6.

6 Cf. Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:8.

Gospel has to be accomplished. But this accomplishment is by no means through verbal proclamation alone but also through the daily living of the new life in Christ.

The Church in Nigeria not only has the responsibility of praying for the people of Nigeria and of bearing witness to God's saving act in Christ in order to assist in the conversion of the Nigerian people, but it has also a political responsibility.

B. ITS POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY

Nigeria as a developing nation is plagued with numerous political problems. Perhaps the political needs of Nigeria may be summed up in the words of a former Head of the Nigerian Government, General Obasanjo, who, in speaking of the need for a new Nigerian society, called for "a DISCIPLINED, FAIR, JUST AND HUMANE AFRICAN SOCIETY."⁷ In his address, General Obasanjo appealed to all Nigerians in every sector of human life to take part in building a new Nigerian society.⁸ It is the considered view of this essay that the Church in Nigeria has a God-given responsibility to take an active part in building a new Nigeria. Such an understanding of its responsibility is a direct consequence of the nature of its existence as a God-centered Community. As a Community of redeemed persons, the Church exists for doing the will of God in all phases of life. Politically, this responsibility may involve the following suggestions:

7 /A/ "Speech by His Excellency Lt. General Olusegun Obasanjo, Head of the Federal Military Government, Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, /Nigeria/, at the formal opening of the Command and Staff College, Jaji, on Monday, 12th September, 1977," p.10.

8 Ibid.

First, the Church in Nigeria has a duty to spread Christian principles of life throughout the political life of the nation. The fruits of new life in Christ and in the Holy Spirit, such as "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness [and] self-control,"⁹ should be carried into political life by Christians in order to bring about a transformed political life. Also, as Christians they are the salt and the light of the world and are called upon to function as such in the society in which they live.¹⁰

Second, the Church has the responsibility of obeying, and of promoting public obedience to, the laws of the nation insofar as such laws are not contrary to the Church's loyalty to God.¹¹ Not only should laws of the nation which are aimed at maintaining order, freedom and justice in society be obeyed by the Church, but the Church, by virtue of its call to love God and to love its neighbour, should encourage other people outside its own community to observe such laws for the sake of the general welfare of all people in the society.

Third, it is part of the Church's responsibility to defend and to protect the weak and the poor who may be denied justice and the basic freedom to act responsibly in society. As a God-centered Community, the Church's responsibility in this manner reflects God's own concern for freedom and justice in his world.¹²

Fourth, another political responsibility for the Church in Nigeria is to help reduce or eliminate political ignorance and political indiscipline in the country. The Church can educate its members about their

9 Galatians 5:22-23 (R.S.V.).

10 Cf. Matthew 5:13-16.

11 Cf. Romans 13:1-7; Titus 3:1.

12 Cf. Psalms 82:1-4; Amos 5:24; Micah 6:8.

civic rights as provided by the laws of the country. It can also encourage them not only to vote during elections but also to vote responsibly. From time to time the Church can organize seminars on such matters, with experts on the subject offering their assistance. By their own exemplary political conduct, members of the Church can influence the society in which they live.

Fifth, the Church in Nigeria has also the responsibility of assisting the government of Nigeria in the struggle to eradicate corruption from Nigerian society. The Church should first ensure that its own members refrain from all acts of corruption as a mark of their loyalty to Christ. The new life in Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit does not only require believers to abstain from foods that are offered to idols but it also requires them to abstain from all forms of corruption which dishonour God and deny love for their neighbour.

Finally, the Church in Nigeria can help to promote a sense of belonging to one Nigeria where the general welfare of all the citizens stands above the selfish interests of the individual and of one particular tribe. The placing of one's personal interest and the interest of the tribe above the national interest often operates on the basis of a dangerous philosophy of life which may be summed up as: 'Nigeria for myself and not myself for Nigeria or Nigeria for my tribe and not my tribe for Nigeria.' The nation and the common good of all its citizens should stand above local interests which are purely self-centered and tribe-centered. The Church as a Community of persons that experience some degree of inter-tribal fellowship should help to promote the cause of one Nigeria where every citizen will aim for the general well-being of all Nigerians in a united Nigeria.

As long as the Church exists in a society, it has to be actively and critically involved in the total life of that society if it is to be faithful to the nature of its existence as a God-centered Community with a God-given all-inclusive responsibility. As S. Paul Schilling rightly observes, "Truly Christian faith involves responsible participation in the life of the society and identification with men as they confront the problems of daily existence."¹³

C. ITS SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Broadly speaking, the social responsibility of the Church in Nigeria is to permeate Nigerian social life with Christ-like principles. There is, however, one specific social task which this study will consider here, namely the responsibility of assisting in creating a new community life in Nigeria which will transcend the existing tribe-centered, clan-centered or village-centered community life. In spite of their great value in promoting community solidarity at the levels of tribe, clan, or village, these traditional communities have become increasingly weak in the face of rapid urbanization, industrialization, modernization and other factors which have brought about changes in the social structure and customs of traditional society. These factors have created or have strongly aided the emergence of modern cities and the movement of people from villages to these cities in search of jobs, higher education and new opportunities for living. In the cities therefore there is the coming together of people from different tribes and from a variety of social backgrounds. One effect of this new grouping of people from different

13 S. Paul Schilling, "Restating the Aim of Mission," in Gerald H. Anderson(ed.), CHRISTIAN MISSION IN THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE: AN INQUIRY BY METHODISTS, p.252.

tribes and backgrounds is that community life in such cities is either weak or non-existent in the absence of one unifying tribal, clan or village Ancestor. However, the need for a community life in these cities is ever present. This need is sometimes reflected by the emergence of tribal, clan and village associations for fellowship and for the promotion of the interests of the particular people that they represent. Such associations are as inward-looking and as closed as the tribal, clan and village communities. One grave danger in this type of sectarian community spirit is that national interests are easily sacrificed on the altar of aggressive tribalism or excessive clannishness. There is therefore a great need for a new community life which embraces people from different tribes living together in close association as each other's keepers in a multi-tribal nation. The Church in Nigeria can help in the creation of a new community life by itself being an exemplary Community where tribal, clan or ethnic differences in whatever form are no longer barriers to authentic community life where each member cares for one another. The basis of this new community is God himself and not a tribal, clan or village Ancestor. He is the one God from whom all families on earth derive their existence and to whom they owe their lives. The Church stands in a unique position to demonstrate this new community life. It owes its existence to the action of the only God of all Creation who reveals himself as God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Church owes its recreated life to the love of God the Father manifested in the self-giving life of God the Son and in God the Holy Spirit who enables the new life to be lived to God's glory in God's world.

D. ITS ECONOMIC RESPONSIBILITY

The importance which the economic dimension of life has assumed in today's world places additional demands upon the Church everywhere to face its economic responsibility without hesitation. For the Church in Nigeria, this responsibility includes the following:

Firstly, the Church has the responsibility of encouraging its members to pay their taxes without defrauding the Authorities to whom taxes are due. In a society where tax evasion constitutes a serious economic crisis,¹⁴ members of the Church should take the lead in paying their taxes and should also encourage their neighbours to accept their responsibility to God and to the nation through the payment of their taxes. After all, as General Obasanjo rightly points out: "The tax paid is for the good and for the improvement of the Society that has made it possible for the individual to carry out his economic activities under a favourable and congenial atmosphere."¹⁵ Not only for the sake of their love for God and their love for all those who will benefit from such payment of their taxes, but also for the sake of their obedience to God, members of the Church should carry out this aspect of their economic responsibility. "Pay all of them their dues, taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due."¹⁶ As a God-centered Community, the Church's life is a life of obedience to God in the everyday situations of life.

Secondly, the Church can assist in the struggle to eliminate economic injustice and economic indiscipline from Nigerian society. Economic

14 General Obasanjo, op. cit., p.5.

15 Ibid.

16 Romans 13:6 (R.S.V.).

injustice is manifested chiefly in the gap between the rich and the poor and in the exploitation of Consumers through the hoarding of goods and profiteering.¹⁷ On the other hand, economic indiscipline appears mainly in the insatiable appetite for expensive foreign goods at all costs and an incredible waste of resources.¹⁸ If the Church as a theocentric Community accepts its overall responsibility to be the Church in the midst of life, it can hardly fail to contribute positively to the eradication of such ills from Society. It can and should always protest against economic injustice. Further, the rich in the Church will have to be generous towards the needy. But it has to be a discerning generosity in order to avoid giving any encouragement to those who have chosen to be poor through laziness. The Church's primary duty to the poor of this type is to persuade them to work for their living and in order to give support to those who are genuinely in need. In another way, the Church can encourage its members who are in business to desist from hoarding and profiteering. By their own example, they can help persuade other people outside the Church to cease from economic exploitation and injustice of this kind.

Finally, the Church in Nigeria can help in teaching stewardship of possessions and a responsible use of God-given resources. It can remind people that God is the giver of all the resources of life,¹⁹ and that he requires that the things he has given should be used judiciously as everyone has to give an account to him about how his gifts of life have been

17 General Obasanjo, op. cit., pp.5-6.

18 Ibid.

19 Cf. Psalms 24:1; I Corinthians 10:26.

used.²⁰ It becomes extremely important then that those who are members of the Church of God, and are by implication required and expected to live their lives to God's glory in all circumstances, should demonstrate their commitment to God in exemplary living.

The Church may not have concrete answers for all the problems of mankind but it can be a responsible Church in any society in which it exists while it anticipates its final consummation.

20 Cf. Romans 14:12; I Peter 4:5.

VI. THE COMMUNITY AND ITS CONSUMMATION

In its present life the Church as a theocentric Community is imperfect. The Community is aware that its obedience to its Lord is not perfect. It experiences sin and forgiveness, joy and sorrow, pain and relief, love and hatred, anxiety and comfort, peace and war, life and death, separation and communion. In short, the Church, as it is now on earth, experiences a real paradox of fullness and incompleteness in its life. But in spite of this experience of its present paradoxical existence, there is in the Church a living hope for a final consummation, not only of its own life but of the whole world order in accordance with the eternal purpose of God for his Creation.¹ The Community anticipates a decisive future when all the present disorder, evil, sin and every limitation of the present age will be removed and life in its fullness will become the experience of all the redeemed. It is a hope for the time when God will bring about a new heaven and a new earth, when everything will be as God intended it to be from the beginning of Creation. "And he who sat upon the throne said, "Behold, I make all things new.""²

With these opening remarks, the intention of this section of the study must be made clear. Far from being a discussion on Christian Eschatology in general, it is simply an attempt to re-emphasize the fact that the Church, as a Community that owes both its beginning and its present life to God, has at the same time its future life firmly in the hands of the same God. The development of this aim will involve

1 Cf. II Peter 3:13; Revelation 22:1-5.

2 Revelation 21:5 (R.S.V.).

a brief discussion of the Community and its final consummation in two areas, namely the basis of the Community's hope in a final consummation and the final judgement.

A. THE BASIS OF THE COMMUNITY'S HOPE

The Community's hope for a final consummation of its life and of the world does not rest on a dream about a utopia for the realization of which there is no valid guarantee at any time in the future. Neither is the hope rooted in man's own ability to consummate this present life; nor is the hope grounded in the belief that the universe itself has an in-built mechanism which will eventually transform the existing world at some appropriate time in the future. Rather, the ground of this hope is none other than the only living God who has revealed himself as God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This hope, being rooted in God, is not in vain because of the unfailing love and power of God made manifest in three mighty events in which the Church as a God-centered Community already shares. First, by creating the world and by sustaining it, God has shown his love and power over creation beyond any doubt. All the things that exist owe to him their origin and their continuing existence.³ This manifestation of God's love and authority anchors the Community's hope in him as the only one who has the capability and the love to consummate the Community's life and that of the world as a whole.

Second, through the life of Jesus Christ, God has further shown his unfailing love and power. His incarnation as God the Son, his

3 Supra, pp.89-98, 231-232.

earthly life and ministry, his death and resurrection not only confirm his authority over Creation but also demonstrate his unfailing love for his world. The Church as a Community of persons who owe their re-created lives to this self-giving of God in his Son Jesus Christ has every reason to be confident in its hope in God for the final consummation of its God-given life.

Blessed be the God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and to an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. 4

The Community's hope for God's consummation of its salvation receives assurance from the love of God which he has graciously poured out in Jesus Christ.

Third, the Church's hope for a final consummation is not in vain because of the unfailing love and power of God which is made known in the gift of the Holy Spirit to believers. By this unique act of love, believers are guaranteed the final consummation of their salvation by God.⁵ For God has sealed them by this gift of his Spirit for the day of their final consummation.⁶

It follows from what is said above that the bringing of all things to their ultimate end can only be the work of the one who as God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit has, through his unfailing love and power, created and sustained all things, and has offered redemption in

4 I Peter 1:3-5 (R.S.V.).

5 Cf. II Corinthians 1:22; Ephesians 1:14.

6 Cf. Ephesians 4:30.

Christ. Such a Supreme Being, indeed the only Living God, is the ground of the Community's hope for a final consummation.

B. THE FINAL JUDGEMENT

The Church as a theocentric Community as well as the rest of mankind faces a final judgement in the age to come.⁷ This judgement is an act of God who as the creator, the sustainer and the redeemer of the world has the prerogative to judge the people that he has made in his own image. It is before him as the Lord of all Creation that every man will appear for the final judgement on the basis of what each one has done on earth. "For we shall all stand before the judgement seat of God So each of us shall give account of himself to God."⁸

However, for believers, the thought of this final judgement should not lead to dreadful fears about their future life. For them, this final judgement will not lead to the loss of the salvation which they have received from God through faith in God's Messiah, Jesus Christ. "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ."⁹ The final judgement which believers will face will not be a judgement resulting in either life or death but the assessment of each believer's faithfulness to God and on that basis the giving of reward.¹⁰ This

7 Cf. Matthew 25:31-36; Romans 14:10-12; II Corinthians 5:10.

8 Romans 14:10, 12 (R.S.V.).

9 Romans 8:1 (R.S.V.).

10 Cf. Revelation 11:18; Donald Guthrie, NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY, pp.86ff; George Eldon Ladd, A THEOLOGY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT, p.566.

view about the Community's final judgement should in no way lead to any complacency in the Community's present life. It should, on the contrary, inspire every member of the Community to persevere in living this present life to God's glory while holding on to the living hope in God's final consummation of the Community's life.

CHAPTER FOUR

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

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At this point of the study, the only task that remains is to recapitulate the major points of the dissertation and to offer a few concluding remarks.

A. There are many factors which contribute to the present-day interest in the study of the nature of the Church. Some of the factors are:-

1. The hiddenness of the Church
2. The changing character of the Church
3. The Church's relationship to the world
4. The Ecumenical dialogue
5. The problem of Jewish-Christian relations
6. The problem of Church and Culture relationship
7. The Church's relationship to the Triune God.

For this writer, not only do these factors underline the need to examine continually the nature of the Church, but they also point out the necessity for an African Christian ecclesiology.

B. Not only in the area of ecclesiology but also in other phases of Christian theology, there are increasing demands for authentic African Christian voices in Christian theology. There is a yearning for Christian theologies that are relevant and intelligible to the African Christian. Such a desire is backed up by at least two factors:

1. The need for a Christian theology which takes the African context into consideration. Most of the existing theologies deal with theological issues which are neither intelligible to the average African convert nor relevant to his spiritual needs. Many of the writers of such theologies have either failed to appreciate the

significance of the African world-view for the production of relevant theologies for believers in Africa or they have chosen to ignore such a world-view on the understanding that the African culture has little or nothing to offer the Church.

2. The other factor is the dynamic character of theological discourse. The Church's theological reflection is an on-going undertaking in the light of new problems, better insights and changing cultural forms.

By implication, a major theological task of the Church in Africa is to interpret or translate the Gospel of Christ vis-à-vis the African world-view and in dialogue with relevant non-African Christian theologies. Such a task of translating and of interpreting the Gospel Message in ways that are intelligible and relevant to the needs of the Church in Africa is an all-embracing one. It therefore requires each student of African Christian theology to identify his or her own theological priority through the leadership of the Holy Spirit.

C. The Sources of such African Christian theologies include:-

1. God's Word as mediated by the Holy Spirit
2. Holy Scripture
3. African Traditional Religions and Philosophies
4. African Independent Churches.

D. Since this study proposes that ecclesiology has its root in the doctrines of God and man, African traditional ideas of God and man should not be ignored when developing such a theology of the Church, if such a theology is to be of any relevance to the African convert who is immersed in the African world-view. Such ideas of God and man

in African traditional religions which are relevant to this present study are:-

1. God is the Creator of the whole Universe and he is the sustainer of all that he has created. He is the Supreme Judge over all Creatures. God is a Unique Being, having no equal in heaven and in earth. He is both transcendent and immanent. God is the ultimate recipient of man's worship. Ultimately, he is the one who accepts or rejects all sacrifices and prayers. There are no limits to the occasions for worshipping him either directly or indirectly through his numerous intermediary spirits.

2. Man owes his life to God. He is not self-existent nor is he brought into existence by any being other than God, the Maker of all things. Man's final destiny is determined by God on the basis of man's life on earth. Man's life finds fulfilment only in relation to God, to the spiritual beings that are believed to be God's agents and to his fellow-men, particularly those of the same village, clan or tribe.

E. There are implications for a theocentric model of the Church, arising from the above traditional African ideas of God and man.

1. The Church owes its origin to no other Being than the only God who in traditional African religions is known to be the Creator of all things. He is the same God who has revealed himself as God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. To deny such a connection is to encourage the African convert to think of the Church as having its origin in a 'foreign Deity'.

2. The notion of God as one who sustains the whole creation provides a rich background for emphasizing the idea that the Church

as a theocentric Community owes to God its upbuilding. The Community cannot grow or remain alive without its members being conscious of their absolute dependence upon God.

3. The concept of God as the Judge over his Creation provides a springboard for developing the idea of God's judgement of the Church and of the world as a whole now and hereafter.

4. The belief in God's Uniqueness provides a strong basis for emphasizing the idea that God alone is worthy to be worshipped by the Community that he has founded.

5. The pervasive character of the worship of God in African traditional religions, although devoid of a wholehearted response to God because of the immense attention which intermediary spirits are accorded, calls for a concept of worship which goes beyond the 'one-day-of-the-week' type of worship. The worship of God who is the Creator, Sustainer and Redeemer of all things ought to be part of everyday life. It is also contended that the view of worship which does justice to the African background and yet gives it a transformation is that which sees worship as a celebration of God's existence - a celebration of who God is and what he does.

6. The idea of intermediary spirits underlines the need to emphasize the sufficiency and the finality of Christ's intermediary role.

7. The sense of belonging which exists at the village, clan or tribal levels of existence paves the way for a view of community life which transcends all distinctions. It also provides the opportunity for a concept of responsibility which is God-centered.

8. The belief that man owes to God both his origin and his final destiny opens up an opportunity for expanding the idea that the Church

not only owes to God its beginning and its present life but also its final destiny.

F. The Church as a theocentric Community has its entire life centered on God who as God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit brought it into existence, sustains it now and will consummate it hereafter. God is therefore at the core of the Community's life. This implies that the Community's whole life is to be seen from a theocentric perspective.

1. There are four steps involved in becoming a member of the Church as a theocentric Community, namely God's initiative in giving the invitation, man's response to God through faith in God's Messiah, incorporation by the Holy Spirit and reception into the local Community by those who are already members of it. One implication of this understanding of the Community's membership is that converts should not be denied membership of the Community because of their legal marital status.

2. The Community's worship is a celebration of God's existence as God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This celebration involves doing all things to the glory of God because of who God is and because of his redemptive act in Jesus of Nazareth. To view worship as a celebration of God's existence has a number of implications:

a. The worship of God can no longer be reduced to one day of the week, namely Sunday, but is to be part and parcel of everyday life because it is a celebration of God's existence.

b. The tendency to perceive the Community's worship as the worship of one member of the Godhead is reduced or eliminated when worship is seen as the celebration of the existence of God the Father, the Son and

the Holy Spirit. This means that the Community's worship can no longer be entirely Christocentric but always theocentric, having the Triune God as its focus.

c. The communal or corporate celebration of God's existence ceases to be a monologue in which the Pastor or the Priest does it all while those in the pew passively observe the actor or the actress. As a celebration, the Community's worship involves the participation of the worshippers.

d. In the celebration of God's existence, demands are made upon the whole life of the believers or the Community. The Community's response to who God is and to what he has done in Christ and continues to do in the Holy Spirit can only be a total response involving the Community's whole life. The cultural vehicle for celebrating God's existence can no longer be restricted to one 'universal culture', but everything that is noble in each culture in which the Church exists can serve as the means for celebrating God's existence.

e. The Community's public worship takes on an additional note of jubilation and meditation because it is a celebration of God's existence for what he is and for what he has done and continues to do for his world.

f. Under this view of worship, the occasions for communal worship of God are as comprehensive as possible because worship as a celebration of God's existence can no longer be restricted only to such occasions as are directly associated with God's redemptive act in Jesus Christ. That event itself has opened up greater opportunities for the redeemed to worship God in all areas of life. Therefore, in addition to its public

celebration of God's existence at Christmas, Good Friday, Easter Sunday and Pentecost, the Church in Nigeria can include such occasions as Planting-time, Harvest-time, Birth, Puberty, Marriage and Death in its liturgical calendar. These occasions, which are related to God's provision of the fruits of the earth and to the four cardinal points in man's life, are vital occasions for the worship of God in the traditional religions. The Community's public celebration of God's existence on these occasions is not only a transformation of a veritable tradition but it does promote the Community's glorification of God's name in wider areas of life. The occasions are ultimately created by God and they are to be dedicated to his glory.

3. The Church as a God-centered Community grows both qualitatively and quantitatively through its response to God who is the Source of its life. This response to God includes openness to the Holy Spirit, devotion to prayer, devotional study of the Bible, devotion to the worship of God and sharing one's life with others.

4. To regard the Church as a theocentric Community has implications for the nature of the Church's responsibility and for the way that responsibility is pursued.

a. The Community's responsibility is to be viewed in a theocentric perspective. The responsibility is given by God and it is carried out in the power of God and for the glory of God.

b. The responsibility is all-embracing, covering all areas of life.

c. The execution of this God-given responsibility involves every member of the Community.

d. The primary incentive for the Community's discharge of its responsibility is love for God and love for one's neighbour.

e. The Community can only accomplish its theocentric responsibility through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit.

5. The Church as a theocentric Community not only owes to God its genesis and its present life but also its future life.

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